

Aren't We Already in 'Undeclared Third World War' with Changed Dimensions and Instruments?

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In the era of intense Trade War between various world powers,

use of multinational forces (even without UN sanction), Proxy war by nations using irregulars, use of terrorists supported by militaries, terrorism, information warfare (including perception management, cyber attacks, and use of media including social media), military posturing through military exercises, expansion of military bases, diplomatic pressures and technological threats, there is a need to give a fresh look at the definitions of War, World War, Cold War and analyse if we have already entered the Third World War or otherwise. It may well happen that because of mutually destructive capabilities of a large number of powers, the full scale, declared World War like First or Second World Wars between combat forces may not occur, as it will be economically devastating for all major powers, as none of them can afford it. The military hardware (including nuclear weapons) however will continue to grow as an instrument for deterrence, as well as trade.

New Parameters of Comprehensive National Power (CNP) Necessitate Redefining World War

There are different factors considered by different agencies trying to measure CNP, the most commonly accepted ones are: economy (including energy security), military strength (including nuclear capability), strategic positioning, foreign policy/diplomacy, governance Human Development Index (HDI), technological capability, knowledge and information, geography natural resources, national will and leadership. Out of all the factors mentioned above, economic power has the over-riding factor dictating the rest of the factors. This means that the trade war/economic warfare have emerged as the most predominant factors in future strategic positioning of various countries.

With changing realities there is a need for reality check to gauge whether the world is going through 'Cold War' as most strategists suggest, or it is a modified form of World War. During First and Second World Wars era, use of military forces and declaration of war was basic essentiality to call it a World War. War was defined to be a state in which a nation prosecutes its right by force. Similarly as per Collins English Dictionary; a World War is a war that involves countries all over the world. The strategists all over the world normally call the present global situation as 'Cold War', which as per Cambridge Dictionary, is a state of extreme unfriendliness existing between countries, especially countries with opposing political systems that expresses itself not through fighting but through political pressure and threats. This expression was usually used to describe the relationship between the US and the Soviet Union after the Second World War. The erstwhile Cold War has grown in dimension from oil politics, arms race (including nuclear arsenal) to space, Information War, Cyber and Economic War including sale of arms and technology.

Reality Check of Current Global Turbulences to qualify it as 'Third World War'

Let me attempt to analyse each facet of the existing global scenario and see if the current situation qualifies to be called as 'Third World War'.

- (a) If economy is the most powerful tool of CNP, then a Trade War between the two largest economies (US and China) is spiralling upwards at a very fast rate. US slapped economic sanctions on Russia, Iran, North Korea and some other countries. With Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in place, a large number of countries also indirectly face sanctions, which are trading with Iran and Russia including China and India, drawing crude oil from Iran and military hardware from Russia. A number of US allies drawing gas from Russia also get added to the list of countries under sanctions. The US has also imposed heavy tariffs on China and European Union countries, adding fuel to trade war flame. The trade war affects the entire world and puts global economy in

turbulence defining the global nature of war. Chinese Belt and Road Initiative to increase its infrastructure reach and strategic footprints almost in all continents and the counter initiatives by US and Japan are also part of economic and strategic war. The ongoing conflicts like Syria and the ones since last two decades are also linked with economy, sale of military hardware to either side including sale of weapons to terrorists. Military posturing in South China Sea is due to likely obstruction to seamless flow of global trade and exploitation of global commons like international water and resources besides other reasons. The wars are good news for arm manufacturers lobby, and creation of threat is a strategy being adopted for arms sale.

(b) The military force has been physically used in Syria, Crimea where the US and Russia stand on opposite sides, although they have been cautious enough not to attack each other to up the ante to 'Declared War'. In Indo-Pacific the combat forces of US and China are being used for strategic posturing, deterrence and messaging to all stakeholders. China has used combat forces to occupy and develop features in South China Sea, also claimed by others to convert international water into Chinese lake. The combat exercises being conducted in Indo-Pacific are show of force and alliances, besides the optics. The North Korean threatening missile tests, nuclear tests to demonstrate its capability to strike US mainland and US military exercises with South Korea to moderate it, also display the posturing of combat forces.

(c) The military intervention of US and allies in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan without UN sanction amounts to war. The military intervention of Saudi Arabia and multinational force in Yemen also qualify to be called as war.

(d) Terrorism and Cyber is an omnipresent threat for all countries. The global war on terrorism is a common slogan but divides the world into various groups depending upon their individual country's perception of terrorist groups. The theory of 'Good and bad terrorists' and individual interests of countries have overtaken the unified global cause and have

got mixed up with major powers fighting some terrorist groups and closing eyes towards others.

(e) The changes in global situation have also impacted the outdated concepts of war fighting. Expecting a nuclear war between major nuclear powers is unlikely because of being mutually destructive. This has been replaced by countries trying to increase nuclear and missile capability using safety as an excuse. The most dangerous and doable component is the threat of usage of tactical nuclear weapons, and a danger of tactical nukes or dirty bombs getting into the hands of the terrorists either by default or design or coercion of scientists. Related with it is a wild card entry like North Korea and Pakistan using nuclear blackmailing to avoid conventional war.

(f) The allegations of use of nerve agents in Syria and by North Korea also bring in the UN banned element of warfare amongst the adversaries. Despite a ban by UN, this arsenal is being prepared and selectively used.

(g) The technological competition is an added dimension to warfare. The space was initially exploited for welfare of mankind, but now the space warfare has also taken a dangerous turn with each side taking preparatory actions to destroy each other's satellites and other space infrastructure.

(h) There is very little doubt that use of all elements of information war, to include misinformation campaign, election meddling, cyber war, hacking of economic and crucial military network are already in progress. US President Donald Trump has signed National Defence Authorisation Act (NDAA) into law on 13 Aug 2018 a new US defence bill that, among other provisions, prioritises a "long-term strategic competition with China" and calls for an evaluation of propaganda, economic tools, hacking and "defence installations," that Beijing allegedly uses against Washington.¹ This clearly gives out the kind of activities which are alleged to be increasing from so called 'Cold War' to next level in the dimensions explained above.

(j) Diplomatic wars to include formulation of alliances like QUAD, enlarging scope of Shanghai Cooperation

Organisation (SCO), expelling diplomats and counter diplomatic offensive by other side, joint military exercises are new instruments of expression of collective power.

(h) The number of casualties suffered in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and other areas, and the number of refugees displaced due to these conflicts surpasses the total casualties as well as refugees of both the earlier World Wars put together. In Syrian War alone 3.5 million people have been killed.

The reality check brings out that the present global situation has every element of a World War except that the dimension, instruments and modalities have changed, and the war has not been 'Formally Declared'.

Grouping and Alliances

The reality check also brings out change in new emerging grouping of countries for the World War. The first possible grouping seems to be China, Russia, North Korea, Turkey, Iran, Qatar and Pakistan. The second possible grouping emerging seems to be USA, Israel, UK, Saudi Arabia, Australia, Japan, Egypt and some of the Gulf states. The G-7 meeting showed that the classical West seems to be weakening, calling it to be a G 6+1 alliance, with everyone unhappy with 'America First' attitude of US. While the G7 includes two thirds of the world economy, the SCO only represents 20 per cent of the world economy and 40 per cent of the world population. With India getting full membership in the SCO and Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS) and relative differences emerging amongst members of the G-7, a shift to the Asian pivot is expected. The erstwhile allies of the USA and NATO countries are relatively old alliances, but do not mind shifting sides on issue based economic interests, like some NATO allies joining Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and drawing gas from Russia. The majority of western countries, however, still have convergence of ideas, concerns and thoughts.

With Chinese global ambition, strategic and economic expansion designs through BRI and a more confident Russia under Putin, the western countries may find that their being together in organisations like NATO, EU and G7 is more of

compulsion than a choice. There will also be a group of countries like India following independent foreign policies, and may be part of issue based multiple alliances and strategic partnerships. The reality is that the world has become so interdependent, interconnected and multi-polar, with numerous groupings and alliances, that a 'First and Second World Wars' style of world war in future is less likely. It can also be argued that unlike earlier world wars, the Third World War may be of much longer duration which could last for decades, and what we are witnessing is the preparatory phase of the war, which itself may last for a decade. Michael Pillsbury has already pointed it out in his book 'The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower'². The only component missing from defining the existing global situation as 'Third World War' is declaration of it as a war; hence it may not be wrong to call it 'Undeclared Third World War'.

Key Players of the Undeclared Third World War

USA versus China: The US and China are into the most fierce trade war, strategic and military posturing, diplomatic and information war of recent times, despite being the largest economies and having heavy economic dependency on each other being the biggest trading partners. China made best use of the US relative inaction in Indo-Pacific Region during their elections period, to make irreversible progress in South China Sea, correctly appreciating that any major standoff was unlikely during that time. China managed to convert features/atolls to artificial islands with infrastructure build up, ended up constructing military bases, thereby increasing its strategic space. China managed to deploy powerful anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems to all seven of its new artificial islands in the Spratly archipelago, along shipping lanes that carry USD 5 trillion worth of global trade per year.³ The deployment of China's weaponry and infrastructure in various artificial structures in South China Sea (SCS) has continued to increase, despite intense military posturing, and optics of coining Indo-Pacific terminology, and naming 'The United States Central Command' as 'Indo-Pacific Command'. The diplomatic swinging of Philippines stance/leadership on SCS, or influencing consensus of ASEAN (exploiting their varying

individual interests) on their outlook towards SCS by China, which is bandwagoning smaller neighbours by “infrastructure diplomacy” and “Purse Diplomacy” and now by “Debt Trap Diplomacy” are part of the economic war. The biggest gain China has made is in Pakistan, by exploiting receding US interest there, to get warm water access through China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and getting space for commercial/ potential military base at Gwadar.

The saber rattling in South China Sea is on since last two years or more. President Trump has allocated financial resources to defence almost three to four times as that of China, which displays his determination of not losing superpower status to China. US has lifted arms embargo on Vietnam, is issuing latest weaponry to Taiwan (despite Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi asserting that no country is exempted from ‘One China Principle’ (SCMP, 16 Dec 2016)). President Trump has signed the Taiwan Travel Act, which encourages more official meetings between Taiwanese officials and their US counterparts, and has commenced such visits there, indicates how keenly the strategic space in Indo-Pacific is going to be contested by US and China.

The economic war between these two economic giants is in dangerous stage with US imposing heavy tariffs commencing from the released list of USD16 billion worth of Chinese goods on 07 Aug 2018, subject to increase of 25 per cent import tariffs later. China responded immediately with a vow to impose retaliatory duties on an equivalent value of imports. The spiral moved up with President Trump proposing tariffs on USD 200 billion of Chinese goods from 10 to 25 per cent, and also a threat to consider imposing tariffs on all USD 500 billion of Chinese imports.⁴ China also retaliated putting a brave front with some counter tariffs, along with other measures to include efforts to push Yuan as global currency, tricks of devaluation of Yuan. The strengthening of AIIB and making efforts to launch BRICS Bank are some visible indicators of heated economic war. Against the backdrop of such dramatic escalation, resolution appears to have distant prospects.

US support to India on certain issues like Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), followed by the recent visit of President of Taiwan, Tsai Ing-wen to USA, where she was allowed to give a speech as

she travelled through Los Angeles, is a burning example of Washington's recent moves to promote ties with the self-governing island, which is the most sensitive issue in Beijing's relationship with the US. It has irked China out of proportion and has posed a serious challenge to its claim and bravado of regional strategic dominance, giving a readable signal that US is in no mood to be pushed out of Indo-Pacific Region.

US versus Russia: The age old Cold War of capitalists *versus* communists steered by the US and erstwhile USSR, is being followed up by Russia shifting it to Ukraine and Crimea from heart of Asia. Economic sanctions of West on Russia, adversarial stance in dealing with IS in Syria (for and against Sadat), the latest news of alleged Russian role in election process of US (Cyber Warfare), and the controversies surrounding President Donald Trump's relationship with Russia, indicate extension of the same war defined earlier. These moves, to some extent, have increased mutual interdependency of Russia and China, for mutual convenience. When President Trump's National Security Strategy 2018 was released it was clear that he was aiming at Russia and China both as competitors, as he is conscious of Russian nuclear and technological power. It is interesting to speculate whether Trump's remark was aimed at Russia or China or both. The unprecedented trend is Russia's growing interest in Pakistan, be it through arms sale, military exercises or recent interest in Afghan Taliban, has caused concerns for India. It may also be relevant for US in terms of prolonging their stay there, to prevent loss of strategic space. Notwithstanding the moves mentioned above, Putin has come out much stronger after his re-election. He demonstrated his threatening arsenal and technological power to signal that Russia is still a strong military power to reckon with. His recent success of edging out US from Syria and negotiating with Israel, supplying gas to US ally Germany, and standing up with Iran are signals that it is unlikely to give a walk over to US. It now remains to be seen as to how both calibrate their relationship in near future to avoid any catastrophe, as Russia still has the largest stockpile of nuclear arsenal, has competitive technology and above all, a strong leadership.

Can India Avoid Taking Sides?

India has a set of convergences and divergences of interests with each of the key players namely China, USA and Russia. India has so far been able to keep these relations exclusive of each other, and hence, has been able to successfully manage an independent foreign relationship without any bias. In the turbulent complex environment of today, our convergences and divergences have started impacting each other. India's differences with China on certain aspects of Sino-Pak nexus, use of global commons in South China Sea and Indian Ocean, and obstruction to Indian entry in NSG can also be viewed as convergence of interests with US. India's differences with US on trade, tariff, and CAATSA in context of Russia can be seen as convergence of interests with China. Russia despite being India's long term strategic partner and major supplier of defence equipment, is showing a recognisable tilt towards Pakistan; as Jeff Schubert in his publication indicates that, Russia's priority in upcoming relations will be China ahead of India and Pakistan, which fits in their idea of Eurasia.⁵ Russian offer of training Pakistani military officers immediately after US closed the same, gives credentials to this theory besides, military exercises and supply of hardware to Pakistan. Despite such complexities, the silver lining is that the US, as well as China want better relations with India and vice versa. Russia also will not like to give up the largest purchaser of military hardware and a strategic partnership which stood the test of time even in Cold War era, hence, with smart diplomacy, India should be able to manage an independent foreign policy in current global environment.

New Paradigm, Dimensions and Instruments of Third World War

The dimensions of war have grown from erstwhile conventional wars under nuclear hangover (barring nuclear strike on Japan) to Cold War, arms race (including Chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear defense (CBRN) arsenal), with political bouts interspersed with few offensive actions. The world is yet to mentally accept the transition of World War into a new dimension to encompass economic warfare, trade, diplomatic manoeuvres, technological, space, and information war including cyber warfare.

The conventional war has now taken a back seat, but the space exists for such wars at regional level within the overall ambit of Third World War. The new paradigm will be that unlike earlier World Wars, all countries will not be at war, because all of them may not agree to common narratives of key players, hence some countries would be at hot war like Saudi Arabia and Yemen, some countries will be in heated Cold War, and some will be using other dimensions and instruments of war like economic warfare, trade, diplomatic, technological and information war including cyber warfare. Capturing territory may not be the aim of war, unlike earlier World Wars, but economic interests will override other factors. The other recent additions to instruments of war could be strategic and economic alliances, strategic posturing, joint military exercises like Malabar Exercises, but the most discouraging part is the entry into a dirty domain like double gaming with respect to terrorism, despite everyone claiming to be together in global fight against terror. Unfortunately, despite humanity suffering heavy losses, the theory of 'good and bad terrorists' is still being followed by some powers, because individual national interests are overshadowing global interests. The space dimension is not yet fully explored; hence with recent advancements in this field, the world may see former President Ronald Reagan's fancy dream of 'Star Wars' to new potential. The strategic power of water is the next dimension likely to get added in future, besides oil politics.

The unwritten rules of war have also changed, to an extent that the arch competitors continue to engage commercially, irrespective of the strategic situation like US-China, China-Taiwan, Japan-China etc, despite using other instruments to fight the differences between them. It is expected that in a multilateral world of today, no one country will be able to dictate the strategic choices of others or force any country not to act in its national interest in future; hence the idea of everyone accepting one country as superpower or global leader may soon be outdated. It also proves a point that any country, which thinks that it can rule the world all by itself, is sadly mistaken in the future world, which is overly interlinked. All countries, big or small will protect their national interests even in ongoing heated trade, diplomatic, technological and information war including cyber warfare.

US and China the two largest trading partners are putting a brave front in the trade war. Both sides have dug their heels, while seriously looking at some resolution, which seems to be difficult, as China and Russia are perceived to be a threat by US, having been pushed out from Pakistan and Syria. South China Sea standoff, North Korea's changing gears, and China's pro Iran stance together with BRI is likely to be perceived as struggle for global strategic space, which US is unlikely to give up so easily, after boosting its defense budget three to four times as that of China. The economic as well as population fulcrum is definitely shifting towards East; hence it is well on the cards that the next few decades will see the pivot shifting towards East, as it has fastest growing economies as well as population centres. It can, therefore, well be argued that the battleground for 'Undeclared Third World War' is Indo-Pacific, and the world has already entered in preparatory phase of it, without recognising it to be so.

Endnotes

¹ 'Cold War Thinking': Beijing Says New US Defence Bill Meddles in Chinese Affairs, Sputnik News International, 14 Aug 2018. <https://sputniknews.com/asia/201808141067173259-china-usa-ndaa-protest-negative-stance/>

² Pillsbury Michael, The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower, Amazon Publishers, 15 Mar 2016.

³ China Arms Its Great Wall of Sand, Wall Street Journal, 15 Dec 2016. URL <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-arms-its-great-wall-of-sand-1481848109>

⁴ Jiangtao Shi and Owen Churchill (2018), More than tariffs: China sees trade war as a new US containment tactic, South China Morning Post, 19 Aug 2018. URL <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2160375/more-tariffs-china-sees-trade-war-new-us-containment#add-comment>

⁵ Schubert Jeff, Russian Economic Reform, Report, 05 August 2018. URL <http://russianeconomicreform.ru/>

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