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About the Monograph

The ongoing Russia–Ukraine War offers important lessons not only for military practitioners but also for students of statecraft. This paper argues that in prolonged wars, the ‘Means’ component of the classical Ends–Ways–Means framework assumes overriding importance. While political objectives and military methods remain essential, the preservation of national power must become a continuous consideration throughout a conflict. Leaderships are often confronted with difficult choices between pursuing uncertain military victory, accepting a politically painful compromise, or preserving sufficient national strength to enable future recovery and resurgence. The Ukraine conflict illustrates how early battlefield success, substantial external assistance and optimism can gradually give way to the harsher realities of attrition, manpower shortages, economic strain and declining international support. As wars lengthen, industrial capacity, demographic resilience and national endurance frequently become more decisive than battlefield achievements. The paper examines how the pursuit of maximalist objectives can risk exhausting the very foundations of national power that strategy is intended to protect. Using the ongoing Ukraine War as a contemporary case study, it argues that strategic success should ultimately be measured not merely by territorial outcomes or military gains, but by the condition of national power that remains after the conflict. The preservation of human capital, economic viability, social cohesion and state capacity is often the decisive determinant of long-term national survival and future strategic relevance.

**Cutting Losses is also a
Smart Strategy in Modern
Statecraft: The Ukraine
Experience**

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Introduction: Means as an Overriding Component of Strategy in Long Wars

Beyond Victory: Statecraft, Strategy, and the Preservation of National Power

*“Strategic Wisdom Lies Not Merely in Fighting Well, but in
Knowing When to Stop Fighting”.*

In the classic ‘Ends-Ways-Means’ framework of strategic planning, the centrality of means—inter alia, national power—becomes particularly evident during long wars and conflicts, both in kinetic and non-kinetic domains. Before and throughout a war or conflict, a nation must continually focus on preserving its national power at every stage to ensure the long-term survival, recovery, and resurgence of the state and its people. National leadership must always make difficult choices to preserve and conserve national power. The options of continuing the war towards an uncertain end state, pursuing outright victory at the cost of severely degrading national power, or curtailing the conflict at a disadvantage while preserving sufficient national strength that would allow rebuilding with dignity, present extraordinarily difficult choices for any leadership.

The ongoing Russia–Ukraine conflict offers a multitude of lessons for practitioners of warfare and statecraft. For practitioners of warfare, it is about innovation and imagination in exploitation of technology by harnessing all resources available from the private players to the allies and partners that contribute funds and warfighting equipment to stay ahead of a militarily stronger adversary. For those seeking to understand the principles of statecraft, it is about the limits of external support in diplomacy, economics, technology, information, and, most importantly, human resources. As the duration of war extends, the enthusiasm of allies to empower and enable diminishes. In the 21st Century, wars are more often fought out of compulsion than choice as human costs have become increasingly unacceptable to nations howsoever powerful they maybe. These have a political cost. Even radical regimes, monarchies, and dictators may appear overtly threatening and aggressive, but they generally avoid the application of military force beyond a level of escalation that they cannot control.

Ukraine performed remarkably well in the initial months against a Russian offensive that underestimated terrain, weather, and logistics.

Russia's initial failures generated optimism within Ukraine and its supporters. Buoyed by early battlefield successes and substantial Western assistance, Kyiv continued to pursue military objectives that appeared achievable at the time. However, wars evolve. As the conflict lengthened, momentum shifted away from manoeuvre warfare and battlefield initiative towards attrition, industrial capacity, manpower and endurance. Ukraine's greatest strategic challenge emerged not on the battlefield alone but in adapting its political objectives to changing realities. President Trump later offered a potential off-ramp, but it was not accepted by Ukraine and slowly the conflict has shifted from a military stalemate towards a strategic defeat. Unless providence intervenes, the die is cast for the Ukrainian war.

Even if a reasonably positive outcome is achieved, the degradation and destruction of the state's infrastructure, economic stagnation, the significant debt accumulated, and the loss of diplomatic capital in Europe and across the world will take considerable time to recover from. The reconstruction effort of the destroyed infrastructure will burden the country to debt for decades and leave

it vulnerable for generations to be held hostage to foreign influences. While the elements in the physical realm will be recoverable and replaceable, the most vital component of national power, the people, will not be. The substantial number of lives lost, fragmentation of the society, polarisation of the country and the psychological traumas of the younger generation cannot simply be reversed. Ukraine increasingly risked bearing a disproportionate share of the human, economic and demographic costs of a conflict whose geopolitical implications extended far beyond its borders.¹ Ukraine's experience in the ongoing war, now in its fifth year and exceeding the duration of the First World War, is worth examining by the strategic community for the lessons it offers on the conservation of national power as an important end state of war or conflict.

Chapter 1 - Imperfect Ceasefire or Perfect Win at Cost of Complete Destruction: A Dilemma

The Imperative of Strategic Adaptation

The central argument advanced in the author's earlier paper, 'Will Winter 2025 Decide the Fate of the Russia–Ukraine War?' published in News Analytics Herald in Dec 2025 edition, was that Ukraine faced precisely such a moment. At that stage of the conflict, signs were already visible that the war was entering a phase where attrition, economics, manpower and endurance would become more decisive than battlefield manoeuvre.² The possibility existed that an imperfect ceasefire, though politically painful, could preserve national strength for a future and more favourable geopolitical environment. That argument was controversial then but the developments since have made it worthy of re-examination to inform the practitioners and strategic thinkers alike.

Nations do not suffer decisive defeat because their soldiers lacked courage, but their political leadership failed to recognise changing strategic realities. The inability to adapt political objectives to

military circumstances has repeatedly transformed manageable setbacks into national catastrophes. From the trenches of the First World War to more recent conflicts in the Middle East, prolonged wars have often destroyed the very national capacities they were intended to defend. The same dilemma has appeared in other contemporary conflicts. Initial military success often creates a temptation to pursue complete victory rather than a favourable settlement. Yet prolonged campaigns consume resources, exhaust military inventories, strain alliances and generate wider economic consequences. Strategic success therefore requires recognising the point at which additional military gains no longer justify their national cost. In Iran–United States (US) conflict, Americans achieved significant success in the first few weeks of Operation Epic Fury that was launched on 28 Feb 2026 is instructive of the dilemma.

The Ukraine War represents one of the clearest contemporary examples of this phenomenon. What began as a war of territorial control and national sovereignty gradually evolved into a broader geopolitical contest involving Russia, the US, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and much of Europe. As the conflict expanded in

scope, the relationship between military operations and political objectives became increasingly complex. While Ukraine continued to fight with remarkable determination and innovation, Russia absorbed sanctions and early losses to turn the tide of war while adapting its economy and military structures to sustain a prolonged conflict. Ukraine failed to appreciate the changing geopolitical realities wherein the external actors pursued objectives that were not aligned to the interest of Ukraine.

Tragedy of Long Wars

The tragedy of long wars is that their costs extend far beyond the battlefield. Infrastructure is destroyed, industries disrupted, debt accumulates, and demographic trends deteriorate. Civilians increasingly suffer alongside soldiers, creating social trauma that can persist for generations. Strategic decisions therefore cannot be measured solely through military metrics. The preservation of national power must remain the ultimate objective.

Another facet showed its ugly face to Ukraine. Friendships between nations are never permanent. The enduring truth of international politics is that external support is never unlimited.,

Nations provide assistance primarily because doing so serves their own interests. Alliances matter, partnerships matter and shared values matter, but national interests remain supreme. As global crises multiply and strategic priorities shift, the willingness of external powers to sustain expensive foreign commitments inevitably comes under scrutiny. Even local shifts in politics determine the extent of support because the geopolitical costs of supporting one side often come at the cost of relations with the other. In close neighbourhoods, ideologies and economics are very narrowly balanced on either side.

As the war exceeds the duration of the First World War³, the Ukrainian leadership faced increasing difficulty in reconciling wartime objectives with evolving geopolitical realities. As competition in the Indo-Pacific intensified in the trade wars, the easy availability of military material became constrained. Instability in West Asia demanded greater attention and sidestepping of the logistics and military wherewithal. Economic pressures within Europe generated political debates regarding the sustainability of long-term military assistance. Defence industrial capacities, already strained by years of support, faced increasing demands across

multiple theatres as the Israel– Hamas, Israel– Hezbollah, and Iran– US conflicts overstretched military and financial resources. NATO in general and the US in particular, found itself in a vulnerable position with respect to China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea axis. The pivoting towards Iran virtually brought NATO to a brink of split.

For Ukraine, this created a strategic dilemma of a desire to continue pursuing maximal objectives even though the resources required to achieve them were becoming increasingly constrained. The justification of territorial recovery had to be justified with additional years of economic destruction, infrastructure damage, and demographic decline. For the political dispensation, the most challenging question should be whether continued fighting would improve Ukraine's eventual negotiating position or weaken it further. This dilemma lies at the heart of modern strategy.

The consequence as appreciated in the end of 2025 was predictable. What initially appeared to be an open-ended commitment gradually became subject to political, economic, and military limitations. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's latest letter on 05 Jun 2026 to Russian head Vladimir Putin

for talks underscored a final recognition of the changed geopolitical priorities. He writes that Ukraine cannot wait for all other conflicts to be resolved and hence was willing to have a direct talk with Putin. The proposal was summarily rejected by Putin.⁴

And that is where the distinction came about in the strategic thinking biased with political survival. It was tactical survival to continue to fight rather than strategic thinking to focus on the nation after the war.

An earlier political settlement, though difficult, may have preserved greater national capacity for the future. Even if the losses were restricted to troubled regions, should have accepted and joined NATO, which would have been feasible in first two years of war.

Ukraine should have learnt from Finland, which accepted territorial concessions following the Winter War, yet preserved its sovereignty and eventually emerged as one of Europe's most stable and prosperous nations.⁵ In Asia, South Korea accepted an armistice rather than pursues unlimited military objectives and subsequently transformed itself into a major economic and technological power.⁶ Nations that preserve their people,

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institutions and economic capacity frequently recover far more effectively than those that continue fighting beyond the point of strategic utility.

The lesson is not one of surrender. Nor is it an argument against resistance. Rather, it is a recognition that statecraft involves balancing military objectives against broader national interests. Political leaders must constantly evaluate whether continued conflict enhances or diminishes future national strength. The Ukraine experience demonstrates the importance of this calculation. While courage and resilience remain essential qualities, they surely cannot replace manpower. As determination cannot substitute for industrial capacity, heroism cannot indefinitely compensate for economic exhaustion. A successful strategy requires the synchronisation of military power with diplomacy, economics, information, technology, and national resilience,⁷ recognising that victories and setbacks are temporary.

Therefore, the ongoing Ukraine conflict offers an enduring lesson. It informs future leaders that strategy is ultimately about choices that are pragmatic and not emotional. A soldier fights battle under the influence of adrenaline, but a politician and strategic thinker considers sacrifices with larger and

longer gains. It is imperative to determine objectives that are essential, sacrifices which are acceptable and the costs that may eventually threaten long-term national interests. During conflicts, there are critical moments when the wisest course is to preserve strength for a more favourable day.

The position of China, a mighty power both economically and militarily, in application of military power is instructive. In 1962, when they were a country not so powerful, gave up military gains made against a much weaker India due to geography or otherwise is a matter of separate debate. But they were judicious in application of military strength. Even today, as the number 2 power in the world, they make careful choices on where and when to engage in contests and confrontations across all the realms of national power. India took recourse to strategic restraint in 1971, 1999, 2025 and other skirmishes and face-offs both with the Northern and Western adversaries for the larger gains.

The core lesson from the Ukrainian experience is enduring. Cutting losses is not weakness. At certain moments in history, it becomes the highest expression of strategic wisdom. The purpose of statecraft is not merely to win battles or

recover territory. It is to ensure that when the war ends, the nation emerges with sufficient strength, resilience, and national power to secure its future.

When Attrition Replaces Manoeuvre

The Russia–Ukraine conflict began as a manoeuvre war. Russia sought a rapid political and military collapse of Ukrainian resistance through a large-scale offensive launched in Feb 2022.⁸ Ukrainian resistance, combined with Western military assistance, stalled the advance and transformed the conflict into a prolonged war of attrition. Over time, the struggle expanded beyond battlefield manoeuvre and became a contest of industrial capacity, economic resilience, demographics, and political endurance.

As the author examined the likely impact of Winter 2025–26 on the Russia–Ukraine conflict, at a time when Trump had already started posturing for a ceasefire calling Biden’s move to instigate the war in the region a major strategic fiasco, the central proposition was straightforward. The war had been slugfest with dying embers of resilience and narratives apart. The Americans wanted to pivot to other urgent matters: fix the economy, begin investing in Ukraine’s reconstruction, and focus on the larger threat posed by China. On the battle front

tactical brilliance and technological innovation aside by Ukrainians who were supported by the entire machinery of the Western alliance, the lines were static and bloody for both sides. By the onset of winter, the most critical issue was clear. The geopolitical winds had shifted. For Ukraine, funds, military equipment would be a challenge to get. But critically, the human costs were at a stage of irreversible collapse.

Large-scale manoeuvres had become increasingly difficult for both sides but more so for Ukraine. Drones and precision weapon systems had made concentration of troops vulnerable to surveillance and targeting. The supply routes were exposed to precision attacks and headquarters prone to destruction. The battlefield had evolved into an environment of persistent observation where drones, satellites and sensors reduced the ability of either side to conceal movement. The consequence was predictable. Territorial gains came to be measured in kilometres rather than provinces. By the end of 2025, they were measured in metres and body counts. The war had surely transformed into a contest of attrition claiming precious lives and destroying infrastructure that would take years to fund and build.⁹

Every prolonged conflict eventually reaches a point where manoeuvre yields diminishing returns and attrition becomes decisive. At that stage, national power matters more than battlefield brilliance. The ability to replace manpower, produce equipment, sustain economic activity, and maintain political cohesion becomes more important than tactical success.

Innovation cannot Offset Destruction and Losses of Lives

Ukraine displayed remarkable ingenuity in fighting through the war in exploiting the technology, dominating the information domain, and ramping up support at the geopolitical levels isolating Russia while hitting back on infrastructure and deep into the territory on the strategic assets. They used drones extensively while ensuring survivability and flexible response through distributed command systems. Their innovative battlefield adaptation was discussed and emulated across the world. The modified drones and the reliance on drone warfare proved valuable to the Iran as cheap attack systems enforcing the US and allies to respond with expensive interceptor systems in the ongoing war in West Asia. The innovative and imaginative employment of technology altered

military thinking globally. Military institutions across the world began studying Ukrainian methods as lessons applicable to future warfare. The conflict demonstrated that relatively inexpensive technologies could impose disproportionate costs on larger military formations.

However, a facet Ukraine failed to recognise was that innovation alone cannot eliminate the realities of attrition. While drones could destroy tanks, guns, planes on runways and industrial capacities but they cannot replace demographics. The drones and missiles could disrupt logistics and the industries of the enemy, but they cannot create industrial capacity at home. Technology and geopolitical alliances could delay adverse trends, but it cannot permanently reverse strategic imbalances rooted in population, geography, and economic resources.

This became increasingly evident as the war entered its later stages in 2025. Russia adapted to sanctions more effectively than many observers initially anticipated. While sanctions undoubtedly imposed costs, they did not generate the rapid collapse that many Western policymakers had predicted. Russian industry shifted towards wartime

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production. New trading arrangements emerged that altered financial mechanisms in existence since petrodollars became the currency of the world. Though sanctioned heavily with the European countries trying to board and detain all Russian ships or ships carrying Russian oil and cargo, yet the energy exports found new markets, often at discounted rates but sufficient to sustain critical state functions. Russia adapted from economic pressure not through immunity but adaptation.

History repeatedly demonstrates that major powers under sustained pressure often display a remarkable capacity for adjustment. Strategic cultures shaped by historical adversity tend to absorb hardship differently than external observers anticipate. Russia's experience was no exception. By the end of 2025, Russia had changed course to decide on the draft of ceasefire agreement, whenever it happened while the Ukrainians confronted challenges that extended beyond the battlefield.

The destruction of infrastructure imposed cumulative costs with reconstruction requirements expanding continuously. As energy security became an increasingly critical concern, the economic strain rose. But the most irreversible damage was on the

demographic as a strategic concern. The demographic dimension of the conflict received less attention than military operations but will ultimately prove among its most consequential outcomes. Large-scale casualties, displacement of populations, migration of skilled workers and declining economic opportunities have created long-term effects extending far beyond the duration of hostilities. This reality is particularly significant for medium-sized states engaged in prolonged wars of attrition against larger opponents. Ukraine, with a much smaller population, has taken a beating more severely than the Russians.

Ukraine, as compared to Russia, has to visualise the dilemma more logically as every casualty represents more than an immediate battlefield loss. It represents future economic productivity, future innovation, future families, and future national development. Political leaders must therefore assess military decisions not merely in terms of tactical outcomes but also in terms of their long-term impact on national vitality.

While Russia has suffered significant losses but compared to population strength, Ukraine losses are far more severe. Till late Feb 2026, as per an

estimate there are likely to be 10,00,000 Russian military casualties (killed and wounded). The Ukrainian military casualties are likely to be 2,50,000-3,00,000 (killed and wounded).¹⁰

When the author wrote the above quoted paper, ‘General Winter 2025’ was never merely about winter or the projected severity of weather. It was about a strategic inflection point from where a nation at war must consider the transition from hopes of the decisive battlefield outcomes towards the harsher realities of endurance, attrition, and national sustainability. Citizens of Ukraine are extremely courageous, but the trend of war was clearly against Ukraine, and the moot strategic question was whether continued fighting was improving Ukraine's long-term position or gradually weakening the very foundations of national power that would determine its future recovery.

And that is the most important lesson of the conflict. On the basis of a broader principle of modern statecraft the warring or competing nations must distinguish between honourable resistance and strategically productive resistance. The two are not always the same.

Chapter 2 - The Illusion of Unlimited External Support: Why Nations Must Ultimately Rely on Their Own National Power

The most critical lesson for the Indian Strategic community—particularly the politicians, bureaucrats and even the military thinkers—who dwell in the utopian world believing good neighbourly relations, non-alignment, great economy and virtuous diplomatic engagements conflicts and wars can and should be avoided. Beginning with the founding politicians such as Nehru and many in the contemporary Indian political world continue to believe the same even after multiple wars and conflicts.

“Could there be a more ridiculous belief that war can bring peace?”¹¹ writes Sanjay Jha in *The Wire*. It is commonplace for thinkers, writers, and many strategic thought leaders that wars are avoidable. Wars should be avoided but it is not a choice that a sane nation makes. The wars of yesteryears, in the contemporary times and in the future will be

enforced and a country must be prepared for the same.

Another set of strategic community have a misplaced faith on nuclear weapons capability to prevent wars and conflicts. Amarjit Singh breaks that myth amply in his article 'The Myth of Nuclear Deterrence'.¹² The US, Russia and Israel are involved in conflicts with non-nuclear countries. Pakistan and India, both nuclear weapons countries have had a major conflict in 1999 and a minor skirmish in 2025. India and China had multiple faceoffs in past decades itself.

It is often believed that international organisations will intervene in conflicts. In the 21st Century world, the United Nations (UN) and others have not reformed to the new realities of the geopolitics and remain tied to the cold war linkages drawing power and instructions from countries that are on decline. The influence of international organisations in intervening to prevent, manage and resolve wars and conflicts in the twenty-first century has been limited. Similarly, the erstwhile powers involved in direct or indirect conflicts in various issues transcending economy, trades, borders, freedom of navigation, competition to secure energy,

and rare earth etc., have compromised themselves to be of limited value to stop wars and conflicts.

The alliances and partnerships of 20th Century are under stress due to internal political dimensions and economic challenges. The US was able to stitch together a coalition of the willing during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Today, however, Western alliances are increasingly stretched and strained, as their populations are reluctant to become embroiled in conflicts that are perceived as someone else's wars. Body bags and committing limited financial resources have become a political challenge. Even though the US President now claims that he never promised 'No Wars' but his pitch for the second presidency was 'No War'. Despite his best efforts the American forces got embroiled in the Iran conflict where he lost ground within the country even from his popular right-wing base.¹³ Europe, grappling with economic challenges, financial constraints, difficulties in military recruitment, and a diminished military-industrial base after decades of relying on the US for its security, has little appetite for direct military involvement in any war.

Ukraine's strategy increasingly depended upon assumptions of sustained external support. However, its leadership should have recognised that a prolonged war imposes not only severe burdens on Ukraine but also generates fatigue among the countries providing military, economic and political support. During the early phases of the war, Ukraine received unprecedented support from the US, NATO, and the broader Western alliance. Financial aid, military equipment, intelligence support, training assistance, and diplomatic backing flowed in quantities rarely witnessed in contemporary history. This support was critical in enabling Ukraine to withstand the initial Russian offensive and subsequently sustain resistance. The assistance was not merely symbolic. It fundamentally altered the military balance and prevented Ukraine from suffering rapid defeat. Western technology, intelligence, and logistics became essential components of Ukrainian warfighting capability.

However, to presume and expect that Ukraine would indefinitely remain the singular focus of Western strategic attention, was an incorrect assumption. Once Trump came to power with the promise of closing down wars, Ukraine should have

relented. Besides the issue discussed earlier, there were other tell tale signs of the Western powers pivoting away to other emerging concerns and these were evidenced through the entire year of 2025.

As the US faced growing competition with China in the Indo-Pacific, the shift to contain the rise became paramount. The US had to secure the western hemisphere in which China had intruded silently over past decade. The crisis of an unstable West Asia demanded immediate attention as the strategic concerns regarding Iran's nuclear programme intensified amongst Gulf countries and Israel. The US pivot towards Indo Pacific and Asia was evident when Trump made a final pitch to stop the war of Ukraine and Russia in Nov 2025.¹⁴

The most affected were the European countries, big and small, that wanted Russia contained and defeated. But the economic pressures due to the energy crisis as they diversified to other sources were evident. The political dispensation that supported and financed the war were under duress to stop and in certain countries the political parties against the war took control. As Russia succeeded, the rhetoric of support was restricted to the leadership of few countries and the European Union.

Europe, despite its political commitments, was clearly constrained by economic realities, domestic politics and differing national interests among member states. Public support for prolonged conflicts inevitably fluctuated towards war closure and with changing governments and leaderships, the interest in support to Ukraine was waning.

There were other factors as well. Stockpiles of ammunition and major military platforms—including fighter aircraft, artillery guns, air defence systems, tanks, and missile launchers—required replenishment. Defence budgets came under increasing scrutiny as domestic political debates intensified over the scale and duration of military assistance. More importantly, as it happens in wars, the issues of corruption and siphoning of assistance funds started to emerge with the top leadership getting accused. These were distractions, real or part of information warfare campaigns, best avoided.¹⁵

For students of military conflict and warfare, the Ukraine conflict offers another important lesson. States that base long-term strategic decisions on assumptions of sustained external assistance often discover that, as conflicts become prolonged, supporting nations reassess their commitments

through the lens of their own evolving national interests. Those interests can change rapidly.

Russia, meanwhile, confronted extensive sanctions and diplomatic isolation across much of the Western world and sustained economic pressure. Yet as the conflict lengthened, it adapted its wartime posture. Industrial production was reoriented to meet military requirements, alternative economic and trading arrangements emerged, and state institutions adjusted to the demands of a prolonged conflict. More importantly, Russian strategy increasingly reflected an understanding that time and endurance could become decisive factors in a war of attrition.¹⁶ From attrition warfare, the Russians have not shifted to coercion through state degradation with targeting the infrastructure in Ukraine.¹⁷

As military operations evolved from manoeuvre to attrition, Russia's structural advantages assumed greater significance. Its larger population, extensive geography, energy resources, industrial base, and strategic depth provided a greater capacity to absorb losses and sustain prolonged military operations. While these advantages did not guarantee success, they became increasingly influential as the conflict extended into years rather than months.

The broader lesson is that in long wars, battlefield outcomes are shaped not only by military skill and innovation but also by the relative ability of nations to mobilise and preserve comprehensive national power. Over time, demographic strength, industrial capacity, economic resilience, and political endurance become as important as battlefield performance in determining strategic outcomes. The inflection point came in 2025. As the allies and partners of Ukraine shifted attention inward and elsewhere, the balance tilted in favour of Russia. The ongoing conflict in West Asia and the resulting stress on global energy markets, triggered by the successive blockades of the Strait of Hormuz—first by Iran and subsequently by the US—revived Russia's financial position and strengthened its geopolitical relevance. Russia started gaining ground. All the Ukrainian innovations and tactical brilliance have had damages to the Russian infrastructure, industry, supply chain, energy centres, and casualties to soldiers. However, even if a similar scale of damage and destruction were inflicted on Ukraine, the consequences for a smaller country are self-evident.

The Indian strategic planners must draw lessons from the Ukraine experience. Prepare for long wars alone, but if possible close it soonest. It is

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imperative to develop its own capacities and capabilities to fight a long war as friends, allies if any, and partners will have different priorities and compulsions. India should, as far as possible, never allow its national security to be held hostage to external support.

Chapter 3 - Attrition or Manoeuvre: Both Favour the Larger Reservoir of National Power

Courage is indispensable, but mathematics ultimately shapes outcomes, particularly in prolonged wars, as both sides continuously adapt and evolve their tactics and strategies. Military history is replete with examples of smaller forces and nations defeating larger adversaries through courage, leadership, innovation, tactical brilliance, or a combination of these factors. These examples must inspire nations and militaries, small or big.

However, the harder reality is that tactics can be premised on courage and leadership for stories to be told. The cold heart of strategy dictates that size has a silent voice. Countries find solace in strategic depth through geography as in Russia against the German offensive in the second world war where the terrain, depth and General Winters destroyed a triumphant and euphoric German Army that had won every single duel till then. Germany had a phenomenal military industrial complex, warfighting experience, and raw courage. Russia had the courage

and size of geography on its side. The German history reached claimed credit for defeating Russia an inflection point and thereafter the downfall started. Although the US joined the war late and Britain, despite having suffered significant setbacks, claimed credit for defeating Germany, the reality was far more complex and lay elsewhere.¹⁸

History and cold military logic teach a less romantic lesson, that when wars become prolonged contests of attrition, mathematics often begins to dominate heroism. This reality is uncomfortable for a military practitioner who has practised and taught the salience of the role of courage and sacrifice by leadership to win battles. At tactical levels courage remains indispensable wherein soldiers fight, and junior leaders must stay ahead.

However, once a conflict evolves into a prolonged struggle extending over years rather than months, strategic outcomes become increasingly influenced by factors that cannot be altered by battlefield bravery alone. Population size, industrial capacity, economic endurance, energy security, technological production, logistics and overall national resilience influence outcome of war and conflict. These are the elements that determine

whether a nation can continue fighting long after the initial enthusiasm of war has faded.

The Russia–Ukraine conflict has become one of the most vivid demonstrations of this principle in modern times. Ukraine compensated for its disadvantages in size and resources through exceptional determination, operational adaptability, tactical brilliance, and technological innovation. Ukrainian soldiers displayed courage of the highest order and the entire society mobilised with remarkable unity. Military innovations, particularly in the employment of drones and distributed command structures, reshaped contemporary understanding of warfare that is now taught and emulated by all the militaries of the world. Ukraine demonstrated as to how ingenuity could challenge numerical superiority.

But when the replacement of manpower, equipment, ammunition, platforms, and infrastructure became important in the long war, the size of population, economy, industrial capacity, and energy security started to play a role. The balance shifted in favour of Russia. Russia entered the conflict with advantages in geography, industrial infrastructure, energy resources, and population. These advantages did not guarantee rapid success.

Indeed, many were offset by initial operational shortcomings and underestimation of Ukrainian resistance. However, as the conflict extended into years, these structural advantages became increasingly significant.

Although India is not short of manpower, human resources remain a critical strategic investment. The relationship between manpower and strategy deserves particular attention. Contemporary discourse within the Indian strategic community is increasingly devoted to technologies that are transforming warfare, with precision-guided munitions, drones, artificial intelligence, and cyber capabilities dominating the discussion. These technologies are undoubtedly transforming warfare. But the Ukraine war and even the recent Iran conflict has proved amply that technology cannot eliminate the centrality of human capital. Even in the long contests based on technology, wars remain fundamentally human contests as the territory must still be defended by soldiers, particularly in the Indian scenario that is politically extremely sensitive. The type, variety and numbers of platforms and equipment that are fielded in modern wars must still be manned by soldiers and maintained by technicians. The factories, when scaled up must still be operated

by workers and there must be enough demographic advantage to replace the losses of soldiers in wars with trained or semi-trained population.

While the Agnipath scheme is yet to mature and stabilise, one of its principal strategic advantages is the creation of a large pool of trained personnel who can be mobilised during prolonged wars, national emergencies, or large-scale mobilisation. However, an appropriate legal framework for such mobilisation is imperative. These when combined with reserves, the paramilitary force, and the National Cadet Corps give immense depth of human resource to India. They need to be planned for, factored in and made legally tenable.

A challenging and adversarial geopolitical environment can be managed through a genuine whole-of-nation approach that integrates human and material resources.

Chapter 4 - Preserving National Power Post Conflict: The Highest Strategic Aim

“The highest purpose of strategy is not merely to win wars, but to preserve and enhance national power after the conflict has ended”.

The purpose of war should not be simply to prevail in combat but to secure a favourable political future. And that is the core of the instructive lesson informed by the Ukrainian diffidence to seed success, a costly one to Russia, but immensely damaging and destructive for Ukraine. Mario Pantis in his article compares the economic costs for the two adversaries in early 2025. He states that in the economic dimensions, Russia had a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) estimated at just over USD 2 tn, while Ukraine's GDP is one-tenth the size of Russia's, at approximately USD 200 billion. The war has reduced Ukraine's GDP by about 20 per cent, far more than Russia's, exacerbating a long-standing disparity. Russian per capita income is now twice that of Ukraine. He observes that the human cost of the war for Ukraine is the most tragic with more than 31,000 Ukrainian military personnel killed by mid-2024 and as per the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission at

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least 11,743 civilian deaths and 24,614 injuries till 31 Aug 2024. Six million Ukrainians have fled to escape war and military conscription and an estimated four million are internally displaced. According to the UN, Ukraine's population has declined by one-quarter since the invasion began.¹⁹ The situation has since only deteriorated.

In past ancient and medieval wars, a severely scarred and ravaged winner was eventually destroyed either by an ally, friend or surely by another weaker nation. The wars of the modern times cannot be so far reckless but yet one of the most overlooked aspects of modern warfare has been the preservation of future national power.

States often focus on immediate battlefield requirements while underestimating long-term economic consequences which results in strategic weakness even though a nation may emerge victorious from war but remain economically exhausted. The British and the European allies who fought and won against the axis powers discovered to their dismay that they could not retain control over their colonial territories.²⁰ In a usurpation and transition of powers, the US, which joined the war when both sides were suitably degraded and

exhausted, assumed the leading position in the world eventually as their national power was preserved.

Closer home, in 1971, even though Pakistan was comprehensively defeated, India held back after achieving its objectives and emerged stronger thereafter, both politically under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and geopolitically on the world stage.²¹ It is left to speculation if the leaders of that time had pursued the war along the Western Front after the collapse of East Pakistan into Bangladesh, as suggested by many analysts after the war. Similarly, the strategic restraint shown by the Vajpayee government in restricting military operations to only eviction of intrusion brought glory to the country that was recognised as a responsible nation in the region and the world. Both were excellent examples of preserving the national power during and after the war and emerging much stronger.

Therefore, joining a war and its continuance should be premised on the questions that a leader must ask. Would military achievements prove strategically hollow if war destroys the foundations of future prosperity? What was the effect on demographics, social cohesion, economic resilience, and technological capacity, in that order? The answer

to the final question should determine whether a war should be concluded or continued: Did the nation emerge stronger, weaker, or merely exhausted?

This is the most challenging decision for a politician, and even an experienced and battle-hardened military leader who has seen and knows the costs of war. Only a true statesman can make a distinction that lies at the heart of statecraft. The purpose of war or avoidance or curtailment is to secure a favourable political future of the nation.

As the Ukraine conflict prolonged, it evolved into a contest between immediate military necessity and long-term national sustainability. Every additional year of conflict has imposed costs that would eventually have to be borne by future generations in which reconstruction requirements, management of accumulated debt, and rebuilding of degraded infrastructure were in physical domains. The psychological costs, and impact on demography is a challenge to rebuild sustainable societies that is not easy to be surmounted in a modern world where small families are already fragmented.

Russia was aware of the challenges of Ukraine that was relying on external support and yet was lacking in the population depth. Therefore, Putin,

after the failure of the early manoeuvres, pursued a strategy that appeared increasingly focused on slow attrition and thereon to state degradation. But in the heart of the strategy were the American impatience and a divided Europe, whose continued support to Ukraine was premised on fear rather than genuine concern. External actors inevitably pursued objectives that were not always identical to Ukraine's long-term national interests. The unwillingness for the allies to commit troops on the ground and their respective internal divisions to fund a distant war against an imaginary threat was major components of the attrition war that Russia imposed through the rebels and forces operating in sync in the limited areas of interests. They did not seek rapid territorial breakthroughs but a sustained military pressure with the broader objective of exhausting Ukrainian capacity and Western willingness to sustain the conflict indefinitely.

Russia increasingly pursued a strategy of attrition designed to exploit relative advantages in manpower, industry, energy resources, and strategic endurance while testing the willingness of Ukraine's external supporters to sustain long-term commitments.

Preserving National Power Post Conflict: The Highest Strategic Aim

For India, this lesson is particularly relevant. Strategic success will ultimately depend upon the preservation and mobilisation of comprehensive national power. As the future conflicts are unlikely to be short, they will involve prolonged competition across military, economic, technological, and informational domains in which it will be difficult to identify friends, adversaries, or neutral states because each will have their own interests.

Chapter 5 - Strategic Patience and Restraint versus Strategic Persistence should be Defined by Present and Future Contours of National Power

One of the greatest misconceptions in modern strategic discourse is the belief that perseverance and wisdom are always synonymous. Political leaders are frequently praised for refusing to yield under pressure, for displaying determination in adversity, and for continuing a struggle despite mounting difficulties. Such qualities are indeed admirable because nations cannot survive without resilience nor can armies fight without persistent courage. The societies that are not resilient and cannot endure hardship without collective will are bound to fade away or overwhelmed by forces that persistently revisionist. But there always is a caveat. At times it is best to fight later, avoid unnecessary contests, build up comprehensive national power, and if already degraded, seek pause to rebuild and reassess strategy, alliances, and shore up military, economic and demographic strength.

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In the twenty-first century, long wars are back, driven by a transformed geopolitical environment. Conflicts involving states and non-state actors are increasingly fought not merely over territory, but over the control or denial of critical resources, the spread or containment of religious and ideological influence, but are increasingly driven by domestic politics sustained by emotions, lack of pragmatism and narrow objectives for political relevance and survival.

The examples of the US led military operations in Afghanistan are instructive. American impatience was ultimately defeated by the Taliban's strategic persistence, whose leaders openly declared that time was on their side and their greatest ally.²² The shifting of the goal came out short in terms of loss of prestige posts after having won the earlier phases of war, the persistence to stay on and finish the Taliban failed. On the other side, persistence of Taliban won them the war but destroyed the country. Afghanistan after two decades of war is back into 7th Century with no funds or leverage to rebuild a society. Their so-called ally, Pakistan, sensing weakness in the new regime sought to interfere and control internal politics. The neighbours await

degradation of power to seek dominance and interference. As was seen in 2026, Pakistan continues to overfly and carry out strikes over parts of Afghanistan without fear of interdiction or interference from the world. Afghanistan has lost leverage across every instrument of national power. It has little diplomatic outreach, no credible conventional military capability, a fragmented society, negligible economic heft and virtually no technological prowess. Taliban won the ideological war against the US, but their society and country was degraded for decades.²³

On the other side, the persistent US, having to pull out after a prolonged commitment emerged diminished in terms of loss of prestige, unnecessary expenditure, reduced will of their people to fight elsewhere due to war fatigue and an overall diminished national power. These two decades of conflict and focus of the Americans allowed their principal adversary, China, to rapidly grow in all the realms of national power. The rise of China in the 21st Century was due to the persistent commitment of the Americans elsewhere. While the US remained involved in the Global War on Terror virtually alone, heavily invested in Afghanistan, the Chinese pivoted

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into Africa, Asia and even into Europe and South America developing diplomatic and economic linkages that were one-sided. Any attempts to break away had local political and economic costs that no politician was willing to take, even though they were aware of the long-term damage to their national security due to economic and technological subservience.

The principal protagonists, the US and Afghanistan, came out diminished at the cost of each other wherein China and Pakistan gained significantly at their costs.

With short wars and conflicts unlikely to be the norm, it is pertinent for national leaders to avoid domestic political instigations and external geopolitical encouragements for long wars. The internal political forces rarely show larger interests towards preservation of national power and merely want to topple the government of the day. It is equally important to avoid being swayed by external encouragement through alliances, partnerships, and promises of economic and technological support, as each power ultimately pursues its own national interests. As seen in Ukraine, even seemingly

iron-clad alliances and assurances can quickly unravel in the face of domestic political pressures and changing geopolitical priorities.

The decision to enter a war, sustain military operations with determination, or curtail and terminate a conflict should ultimately be guided not by battlefield developments and tactical opportunities or to satiate the emotional outpourings of the population which more often does not understand the consequences of a long war, but by the extent to which larger national political objectives are being achieved. The true measure of success in war is the condition of national power after the conflict has ended and therefore, the military campaigns must be assessed against a fundamental question. Has the nation emerged stronger, more secure, more prosperous, and better positioned to advance its interests, or has it exhausted its strength in pursuit of limited gains? Strategic wisdom lies not merely in winning battles, but in ensuring that the exercise of military power contributes to the preservation and enhancement of national power in the years that follow.

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This requires strategic courage—an attribute that is seldom recognised or understood by people on the street, who are more inclined to admire tactical courage, raw physical bravery, and the theatrics of calls for war. Such courage is only possible in true leaders who know when to enter, avoid, or terminate wars. It comes with '*Prudentia belli*', the wisdom to understand both the utility and the limits of war. Very few leaders are able to develop the strategic intuition—an instinctive understanding of when to fight, when to negotiate and when to stop—along with the politico-military acumen to appreciate the relationship between battlefield outcomes and national interests.

However, there are four instances with reference to India, a country in a disturbed and violent geography, which must be discussed as a reference for instruction for strategic patience.

The first instance was the conventional war of 1971, which could have turned into a long war in 1971 but did not due to the strategic vision of the leaders of that time. The political leader of that time, Mrs Indira Gandhi had the strategic vision to accept the recommendation of the then Chief of the Army

Staff of the Indian Army to delay the military operation for a suitable later date. Even against the advice of her cabinet and growing clamour to intervene earlier, she waited for the opportune time delivering an overwhelming military and political success for India when the entire Western world led by the most powerful country was aligned against. The more prudent action was curtailing the military operation after a rapid manoeuvre in the eastern front destroyed a divided Pakistani military completely within days in military strategy, commanders are taught and trained to maintain the momentum of success in order to exploit situations where enemy forces are collapsing. But the leadership decided to call off the military operation and declare ceasefire thus closing a war that could have been long drawn. Total annihilation would have been possible but at costs that would have consumed the limited financial resources and the geopolitical advantages at the international level.

In the second instance of 1999 Kargil conflict, the visionary leaders allowed the conflict to continue only for the period necessary to achieve the larger internal and external geopolitical objectives.

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While it took months of painstaking eviction of intrusions at significant human costs against an enemy and terrain wherein the defences were hastily prepared, the urge of the country to punish Pakistan by going deeper and expanding the front of the conflict was restrained. India emerged far stronger not only internally but in the world as a responsible nation. A sanctioned and sidelined India after the 1998 nuclear tests led by a minority government emerged as a respected global power. It was an inflection point from where India has only grown in stature and comprehensive national power.²⁴

The third is the most recent one of Operation Sindoor in 2025, when against extreme instigation for the internal political dynamics the punitive strikes were kept short and decisive. There were exhortations by the opposition and the common citizens to the political leaders in the government to continue the punishment and go for a larger war against Pakistan. The leadership exercised restraint, even after the Pakistani air defences were successfully breached, the airbases neutralised and their leadership kneeled, to accept the ceasefire request and pause the operation. The events that unfolded thereafter revealed the strategic intuition to avoid a

prolonged conflagration. The West Asia conflict amidst the slowing economy impacted further by the energy crisis, would have had a severe toll on the Indian comprehensive national power.

The last and equally important, is the calibrated avoidance of India to become involved in a broader border conflict with China and be the proxy of the Western alliance in Asia against China, the principal adversary of US. Despite being promised all assistance, and encouragement to become the sword arm against China, with a fractious opposition egging on to take on China, the top leadership has compromised on the political capital internally and externally, for the larger political aim of investing into the national power rather than frittering away pre-emptively. After the Doklam incident of 2017 followed by the Galwan incident of 2020 and many other face-offs along the northern borders have been managed even though *Jus ad bellum*' (the right to go to war) existed for a scaled-up response to meet the popular aspirations. In the Galwan incident India lost 20 soldiers and Chinese many more, yet a steady management of escalation ladder was managed by both nations.²⁵ There was nearly four years of impasse with China during which

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both sides came close to war or localised conflict but pulled back in time as the costs of war were well understood. The militarily stronger China could be stared down by the Indian military because it was backed by a strong political will by China's own realisation that the unavoidable costs of such an engagement were not in its national interest.²⁶ Throughout the period of four years trade and commerce continued between the two countries even though there were internal political costs for the Indian government. The politics was kept aside in the larger national interest. One must complement even the Chinese, a far greater military and economic power with diplomatic heft far more superior than of India, kept the military restrained. Any military action would have weakened both in the region and on the world stage.

Therefore, strategy demands a distinction between persistence, patience, and restraint. These are often confused in which persistence is celebrated and the other two are derided. Strategic persistence is the determination to continue pursuing an objective despite setbacks; strategic restraint is to hold back or call off a winning bet or cut losses in time for the eventual endgame, while strategic patience is the

wisdom to recognise that some objectives are better achieved by preserving strength and waiting for more favourable conditions. Successful statesmen would possess the three qualities of persistence, patience, and restraint and, more importantly, know when to employ each.

Finland offers one of the most compelling examples. During the Winter War of 1939–40, Finnish forces displayed extraordinary courage against the overwhelming Soviet power. The Finns inflicted significant losses and earned international admiration. Yet Finland's leadership understood a crucial reality that heroism could not indefinitely overcome disparities in population, industrial capacity, and military resources. The Finnish government therefore accepted a painful peace settlement involving territorial concessions.

While at that time the decision of Finland was viewed as defeat but when viewed in broader perspective of history, the country preserved its sovereignty, institutions and national identity avoiding total annihilation and destruction. Today, it has emerged as one of the most prosperous and stable nations in Europe. Therefore, the territory lost

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was significant, but the nation survived and flourished.²⁷

In Ukraine, Zelenskyy opted for persistence that paid off initially but with the war getting longer, Ukraine is accumulating debts and costs that will be borne by the future generations. The Ukraine conflict, therefore, highlights this distinction with unusual clarity.

The war became a symbol of resistance and national determination. For many observers who celebrated Ukraine's courage and resilience against a more powerful adversary, continued fighting came to represent not merely a military necessity but a moral obligation. Yet morality and strategy, while related, are not identical. A morally justified cause can still confront strategic limitations. Political leaders must therefore evaluate not only whether a cause is worthy but whether the methods employed continue to serve the long-term interests of the nation. This is where strategic patience and restraint become relevant.

A similar logic shaped the Korean Armistice of 1953. After years of devastating conflict, none of the participants achieved all their objectives. Yet the decision to halt the fighting created conditions for

South Korea's remarkable economic transformation. Had the war continued indefinitely in pursuit of absolute outcomes, the subsequent prosperity and stability of the Korean peninsula might never have emerged.

Nations that preserved their economic foundations often recovered rapidly from temporary setbacks, whereas the ones that exhausted themselves pursuing unattainable objectives frequently struggled for generations. This distinction is particularly relevant in the 21st Century as stated earlier because modern wars are increasingly expensive. They consume resources at unprecedented rates in which infrastructure destruction is commonplace which has cascading economic effects. In the 20th Century, the critical infrastructure that affected the population was targeted only when it was relevant militarily and that too only when situation necessitated. There used to be a great amount of moral debate on targeting infrastructure and possibility of the response that would have a direct impact on the population. In 21st Century, that debate is off the table. Comprehensive destruction of all assets that contribute to the national power is considered fair targets. In the ongoing Iran

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war, the critical energy infrastructures that have repercussion for the entire world are being targeted.

In Ukraine, the critical infrastructures that are of strategic importance are being destroyed. The world-famous pipeline of Nord Stream 1 and 2 now damaged or defunct was targeted deliberately by Ukraine and Americans to force the Europeans to unlock their reliance from the Russian gas with a view to strain the Russian economy and stress the war funding efforts. Ukraine took the lead in targeting and destroying bridges, as well as power and energy infrastructure. The response from the Russians has been equally reciprocated. According to the UN report of 23 Feb 2026, Ukraine will require a staggering USD 588 bn recovery cost over the next 10 years. With the Ukraine's current nominal GDP of approximately USD 225.34 billion the accumulated financial obligations generated during the ongoing conflict will be carried forward for nearly a decade to pay.²⁸

Ukraine is an example in which a state that exhausts itself in pursuit of immediate objectives may discover that future opportunities arrive when it no longer possesses the capacity to exploit them. The

central strategic question was never whether Ukraine should defend itself, but the more difficult question concerned the relationship between immediate objectives and long-term national preservation. Could a temporary settlement have preserved manpower, infrastructure, and economic capacity for a future period when geopolitical conditions might prove more favourable? Could a reduction in military losses have accelerated national recovery? Could preserving national resources have provided greater flexibility for future generations? These are legitimate strategic questions.

The Ukraine experience illustrates the difficulty political leaders' face when military resistance becomes intricately linked to national identity, external expectations, and wartime narratives. Under such circumstances, reassessing political objectives becomes increasingly difficult even when strategic conditions evolve. The capitulation may not occur, but severe degradation has already happened. This was avoidable in 2023, 2024 and surely in 2025. In 2026, the situation is far worse. The prolonged war has taken a toll on the smaller powers. It can also do the same to larger powers as well.

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Even the US sought a deal with its arch enemy, Iran, when they realised that they were nowhere to achieve the politico-military objectives of regime change, destroying the Iranian uranium project and degrading the ballistic missile capabilities were unlikely to be realised. They called for a ceasefire on 08 Apr 2026²⁹ and thereafter confirmed an unequal deal on 14 Jun 2026, yet to be signed on 19 Jun 2026, wherein Iranians come out better off than 28 Feb 2026 when the Operation Epic Fury was launched by the US.³⁰

Chapter 6 - Lessons for India and the Future of Strategic Competition

This principle is particularly relevant for India as it prepares for an era of intensified strategic competition.

India's security environment is characterised by multiple challenges, including contested borders, evolving technologies, maritime competition, and geopolitical uncertainty. Future crises may place enormous pressure upon political and military leaders to demonstrate resolve.

Having inherited a violent and disturbed geography in 1947, India must pursue a future of prosperity balancing the regional challenges. With great-power competition having pivoted to Indo Pacific, India finds itself at difficult cross roads. A northern neighbour that is desirous of sole power status in Asia, and troubled countries in the west and the east, the compulsion to ally with a stronger external power is significant, howsoever historically unreliable that maybe. Attempts to push for strategic autonomy will come at great costs.

Lessons for India and the Future of Strategic Competition

For India, the lessons are to invest in *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (self-reliant India) a self-reliant military industrial complex, a resilient supply chain, an industry that can swiftly scale up and secure energy through diversification to varying sources and types of energy. Most importantly, the entire structure should be built with redundancies because with new precision technologies strike distances have shrunk. India will have to contest with two adversaries at the same time, with an internal threat to be catered for. As has been evident in all previous wars and conflicts, support of any type from the Western countries is unlikely with few countries that can be relied upon.

Thus, India enters the coming decades in an era that can best be described as one of strategic competition rather than strategic certainty. The global order is undergoing a profound transformation, with the dominance of a single power being increasingly challenged. New technological revolutions are reshaping military affairs. Supply chains, energy security, information warfare, cyber capabilities, and artificial intelligence have emerged as critical instruments of national power. In all these new domains of warfare, the traditional military threats have not disappeared.

The first and perhaps most important lesson is that military power alone is insufficient to secure strategic success. The Ukraine war demonstrated extraordinary battlefield innovation. It also demonstrated the limitations of military power when not fully synchronised with economic sustainability, demographic resilience, diplomatic flexibility, and industrial capacity. Therefore, as seen in the historical examples that thought the wars are fought by armies, they are sustained by nations.

India therefore cannot afford to view military modernisation in isolation. Defence capability must remain part of a broader national strategy encompassing economic growth, technological development, industrial expansion, energy security, and diplomatic influence. While a strong military without a strong economy is unsustainable, a strong economy without adequate security is vulnerable. Therefore, both must reinforce each other. A *Viksit Bharat* (Developed India) 2047 will be a reality only with a balance between *Sashakt Bharat* (Empowered India) and *Samrudh Bharat* (A Prosperous India).

The second lesson concerns self-reliance, a path that the present government has pursued since 2014 with some success but much more needs to be

done. The Ukraine conflict, as discussed earlier, highlighted the value of international partnerships but it also exposed their limitations. External support can be substantial, even decisive under certain circumstances, but no nation can assume that foreign assistance will remain unlimited or unchanged in the given economic recession and energy security crisis. As such over time national interests evolve with change in governments and as strategic priorities shift.

India, since Independence during wars or other challenges, has experienced that external support is contingent on many factors and therefore the long-standing emphasis on strategic autonomy emerges in the light of the Ukraine experience reinforced rather than weakened by these developments. Strategic autonomy does not imply isolation or avoiding partnerships, but it simply implies ensuring that critical national capabilities remain under national control. Given the interest of 1.4 billion population to be managed, India's own institutions, industries, technologies, and armed forces should ultimately decide the priorities.

Future conflicts may need the support of allies and partners, but they will ultimately be decided by the resilience of the country. The recent example of Iran, which stood steadfast against the decades of sanctions and isolation to pursue the strategic aims. And when confronted with a joint force of the US and Isarel during Operation Epic Fury and Operation Lion Roar was able to stare down to come out far better strategically.³¹

The third lesson concerns industrial preparedness. For decades, many nations, including India, assumed that future wars would be short as the modern world will be sensible and responsible. 21st century has belied all such expectations and theories and assumptions. The Ukraine conflict and many others in the 21st Century have shattered this assumption. Afghanistan war (20 years), Iran Iraq conflict (8 years), the Israel Hamas war (three years), Syrian conflict (14 years of civil war), and the ongoing Iran US (nearly four months) conflict have broken all myths.

Unfortunately, in India, the defence industries were structured along assumptions of short wars and a long warning period in case a conventional war had to be joined. Slow and inefficient industries

build for political exigencies rather than for wartime competitions, Indian military and industry was more import reliant rather than looking to build own capacities. With extremely high consumption rates of ammunition, missiles, drones, and military equipment the peacetime estimates have been exceeded by significant margins. Even US had to take a pause in the Iran conflict as the interceptor missiles were exhausted and their extensive industrial complex was unable to replenish at the scale required.³²

Industrial capacity is no longer merely a supporting function but a strategic imperative. India's efforts towards defence manufacturing, indigenous production, technological innovation, and resilient supply chains are therefore not merely economic initiatives. They are national security imperatives. The ability to sustain military operations over extended periods may prove as important as the ability to commence them.

The fourth lesson concerns the relationship between intelligence and strategy. The Ukraine war provided numerous examples of extraordinary intelligence gathering, surveillance and battlefield awareness. But these are for tactical operations. Intelligence must guide strategy as well. The changing

views and compulsions of the allies, internal cohesion, projected casualties, and replacement rates are all part of taking a considerate decision to continue a war or to take a pause to cut the losses. To believe the reconstruction costs after the war will come without strings attached is not real politics. While accurate intelligence can inform the leadership of the country but cannot independently resolve political dilemmas, demographic challenges, or economic pressures. India must therefore recognise that intelligence is most effective when integrated with diplomacy, military planning, economic policy, and technological innovation.

The fifth lesson is that modern strategic competition is unlikely to produce clear distinctions between war and peace. Nations, as is evident now, will increasingly compete simultaneously across multiple domains of economic coercion, cyber operations, information campaigns, technological rivalry, supply chain competition, and limited military confrontations simultaneously. Strategic success will depend less upon individual victories by respective verticals of national power but more upon the ability to synchronise all instruments of national power.

Lessons for India and the Future of Strategic Competition

India has to invest significant energy to develop a whole-of-nation approach. The inter-government rivalries are as bad as within intra governmental organisations. Military transformation must complement economic transformation, and technological innovation must support national security. The diplomatic influence must reinforce strategic objectives alongside intelligence capabilities and industrial capacity. The national resilience must underpin all of them.

The future will belong not necessarily to nations with the largest armies or the most advanced technologies alone, but to those capable of integrating military, economic, diplomatic, technological, and informational power into a coherent national strategy. That is the true lesson of strategic competition.

The sixth and the most important lesson is that of 'Human capital is national power'. The Ukraine conflict must remind Indian strategic planners that wars ultimately impose costs on people. In India, the current generation that has not seen a war does not appreciate costs of war. This education is necessary.

Additionally, while technology changes the character of warfare, but it does not eliminate human capital and sacrifice. India must prepare the population accordingly. While India is not challenged in terms of numbers but the quality of the human capital that can be pressed into military service where technology rules the warfare is something that needs to be invested into. Innovation and social resilience are two qualities that needs to be nurtured. There are many agencies such as paramilitary forces, National Cadet Corps, and other formal and informal societal groups that may have to be invested into. This will become critical when both the fronts are activated with a condition of an internal threat.

For India, whose greatest strategic asset remains its people, investment in education, health, skills, and national cohesion must be viewed through a security lens as well as an economic one.

Conclusion: Cutting Losses is Not Surrender but Strategic Wisdom

The Ukraine conflict will be studied for its military innovations, technological adaptation and the resilience displayed by both societies. Yet its most enduring lesson lies beyond the battlefield.

Wars are ultimately contests of national power rather than military power alone. Courage, leadership, innovation, and battlefield success remain indispensable, but they cannot indefinitely compensate for weaknesses in demography, industry, economics, diplomacy, and national resilience. As conflicts become prolonged, these broader foundations increasingly determine strategic outcomes.

The central purpose of strategy is therefore not merely to win battles or recover territory. It is to preserve and enhance national power after the conflict has ended. Military operations must serve political objectives, and political objectives must serve the long-term interests of the nation.

This requires leaders to distinguish between strategic persistence, strategic patience, and strategic restraint. There are moments when perseverance is essential. There are moments when patience creates greater opportunities. There are also moments when

continuing a conflict consumes national strength faster than it creates strategic advantage.

The highest purpose of statecraft is not the pursuit of perfect victory. It is ensuring that when the conflict ends, the nation emerges secure, resilient, and capable of shaping its future. Therefore, cutting

losses is not surrender. At times, it is the highest expression of strategic wisdom.

“Strategic persistence is the determination to continue pursuing an objective despite setbacks, strategic restraint is to hold back or call off a winning bet or cut losses in time for the eventual endgame, while strategic patience is the wisdom to recognise that some objectives are better achieved by preserving strength and waiting for more favourable conditions”.

Conclusion - Strategic Wisdom Lies in Preserving National Power

The Ukraine conflict will undoubtedly be remembered for transforming the character of warfare through the extensive employment of drones, artificial intelligence, precision strike capabilities, space-based intelligence, cyber operations, and information warfare. Equally significant has been the extraordinary resilience, innovation, and determination displayed by both Ukraine and Russia in adapting to an evolving battlefield. Yet, beyond these military lessons lies a more enduring lesson for students of statecraft: wars are ultimately contests of comprehensive national power rather than military power alone.

The conflict demonstrates that while battlefield courage, tactical brilliance, and technological innovation may shape the course of campaigns, they cannot indefinitely compensate for deficiencies in manpower, industrial capacity, economic resilience, demographic strength, and political endurance. As wars become prolonged, the centre of gravity shifts from battlefield manoeuvre to national sustainability. Victory, therefore, cannot be

measured solely by territorial gains or military successes; it must also be judged by the condition in which the nation emerges once the conflict ends.

The foremost responsibility of national leadership is not merely to prosecute war successfully but to preserve the long-term vitality of the state. Every strategic decision—whether to continue fighting, negotiate, or terminate hostilities—must be evaluated against its impact on the future national power of the country. There are moments when perseverance is indispensable, moments when strategic patience creates greater opportunities, and moments when strategic restraint prevents irreversible national decline. The true test of statesmanship lies in recognising the difference.

The broader lesson extends far beyond Ukraine. In an era characterised by prolonged strategic competition, contested supply chains, technological disruption, and shifting geopolitical alignments, no nation can assume that external assistance will remain unlimited or that alliances will permanently align with its interests. Ultimately, every nation must rely on its own comprehensive national power, built upon resilient institutions, a robust

Conclusion - Strategic Wisdom Lies in Preserving National Power Experience

economy, technological self-reliance, industrial capacity, demographic strength, and national cohesion.

For India, these lessons are particularly relevant. Surrounded by a complex security environment and facing the possibility of simultaneous conventional, hybrid, and informational challenges, India must continue to strengthen every instrument of national power while exercising strategic prudence in the employment of military force. Future conflicts should always be approached with clearly defined political objectives, realistic military aims, and an unwavering commitment to preserving the nation's long-term strength.

The enduring lesson of the Ukraine experience is therefore clear. The highest purpose of strategy is not the pursuit of absolute victory at any cost, but the preservation and enhancement of national power. Cutting losses when the strategic balance demands it is neither surrender nor weakness; it is often the highest expression of strategic wisdom and mature statecraft.

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