Preparing for Future Conflicts: Emerging Lessons for India from the Russia–Ukraine and US–Israel–Iran Conflicts

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"Each generation believes it has solved the riddle of war, yet every conflict reveals new uncertainties. Stability is never permanent; it must be constantly constructed and maintained".
— Henry Kissinger

Abstract

The Russia–Ukraine War and the ongoing contestation involving the United States, Israel and Iran have revealed deep structural shifts in the character of warfare. In both theatres, conventionally advanced powers entered conflict expecting decisive, swift victories but instead found themselves engaged in costly, protracted exchanges that produced high costs, casualties, and uncertain outcomes. These wars expose recurring systemic gaps, including ammunition shortfalls, weak supply chains, cost imbalances in defence, strengths in information warfare, hierarchical command structures and the erosion of territorial battlefields. This article undertakes a comparative analysis to identify these gaps and argues that modern warfare is increasingly defined by endurance, cost-imposition, and multi-

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domain integration rather than rapid victory. It argues that, rather than adopting Western doctrines linearly, India should develop tailor-made solutions focused on Atmanirbharta (Self reliance) and aligned with Viksit Bharat (Developed India). The recommendations suggested emerge from identified vulnerabilities, with each gap addressed by a particular strategy. These conflicts are still ongoing and need close monitoring to refine/modify emerging lessons as applicable to Indian context.

Introduction

In the post-Cold War period, there has been an implicit assumption that technology, precision strike, and manoeuvre can lead to victory. Wars that seemed short and decisive led to the assumption that future conflicts would be controlled, short, and won decisively by technologically superior powers.

However, recent conflicts have challenged these assumptions. The Russia-Ukraine War has become a prolonged, attrition struggle despite Russia's initial advantages in mass, geography, and escalation dominance. On similar lines, the United States (US) and Israeli engagements with Iran and its proxies have demonstrated that even a tactical advantage does not always translate to a strategic one. Instead, they have produced a continuum of escalation, deterrence, and low-intensity conflict without resolution. These developments have also raised fundamental questions about the continued effectiveness of traditional notions of great-power dominance. These persistent conflicts may also stem from unclear or ambiguous political objectives and authoritative leadership prioritising self-image and prestige, undermining strategic clarity and threatening the overall security calculus.

Both the theatres are seeing unprecedented costs, sustained casualties and outcomes that resist decisiveness. This divergence between expectation and reality signals a deeper transformation which brings to the fore the fact that superiority in isolation, whether technological, economic or conventional, no longer guarantees

victory. Modern warfare rewards innovations coupled with resilience, integration and the ability to sustain pressure across domains over time. Security is no longer restricted to territorial integrity or, simply put, the protection of borders; it has become a complex subject in itself. National security involves protecting and synchronising all instruments of national power. The targets of these conflicts are no longer limited to military targets; they now include railway and communication networks, enlistment centres, energy infrastructure, banking infrastructure, and more. The pronounced spike in sabotage incidents in Dec 2024, particularly involving banking infrastructure, further illustrates how contemporary conflicts seek to disrupt critical elements of national power beyond the conventional military domain (Figure 1). In effect, contemporary conflict suggests a shift from wars of decision to wars of endurance, where the ability to sustain operations increasingly outweighs the ability to initiate them. For India, this security environment is ever-evolving, and understanding this shift is imperative.

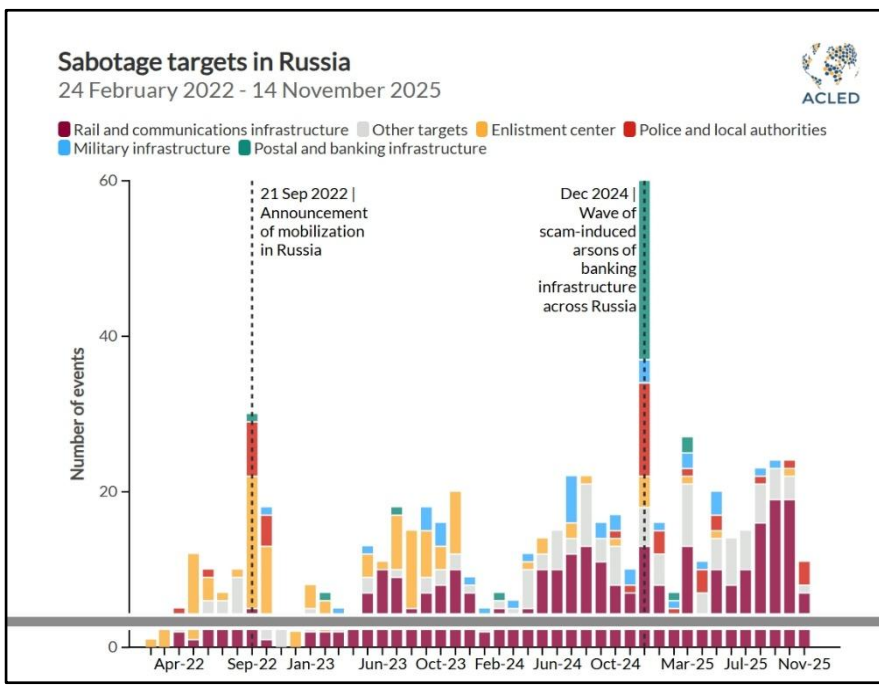


Figure 1: Sabotage targets in Russia
Source: acleddata.com

From Platforms to Systems

Contemporary warfare has transitioned from platform-centric operations to system-level contestation. Earlier, the effectiveness of tanks, aircraft, or ships employed in coordinated formations was considered decisive. Today, outcomes depend on how well these platforms integrate into a broader ecosystem of sensors, networks, decision-support tools, logistics, and industrial backing.

Commercial and military drones, fused with satellite imagery and real-time intelligence, have enabled rapid target acquisition and adaptation in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Low-cost systems have neutralised high-value assets, compressing the decision cycle and reshaping the cost equation. Inexpensive drones costing less than USD 1,000 have been deployed to destroy armoured vehicles costing several million dollars, changing the calculus of cost versus benefit in conflict. But these conflicts have also shown that where integration has been uneven or incomplete, even technologically sophisticated militaries have struggled to translate capability into advantage.

This reveals a common weakness of acquisition outpacing integration. Defence forces acquire state-of-the-art platforms but underinvest in the fundamental aspects of integration, data fusion, and joint processes that turn these platforms into systems. This deficit creates a disconnect between the capacities they build and the capabilities they deliver. As warfare continues to evolve into a multi-domain contest, this gap will widen unless addressed.

Comparative Analysis

Both the Russia-Ukraine War and the US-Israel-Iran dynamic highlight several striking similarities. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and loitering munitions have played a key role in reconnaissance and offensive tactics; Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) has been leveraged to shorten the Observe, Orient, Decide, Act loop; and electronic and cyber warfare has been used to disrupt communications, navigation, and guidance for precision weapons, which in turn have influenced battle outcomes. However, it must also be borne in mind that across both theatres, the financial burden has

been substantial and casualties, both military and civilian, have been significant. These protracted, sustained, resource-intensive contestations clearly indicate that modern warfare is as much about industrial depth, economic stamina, and system integration as it is about battlefield prowess.

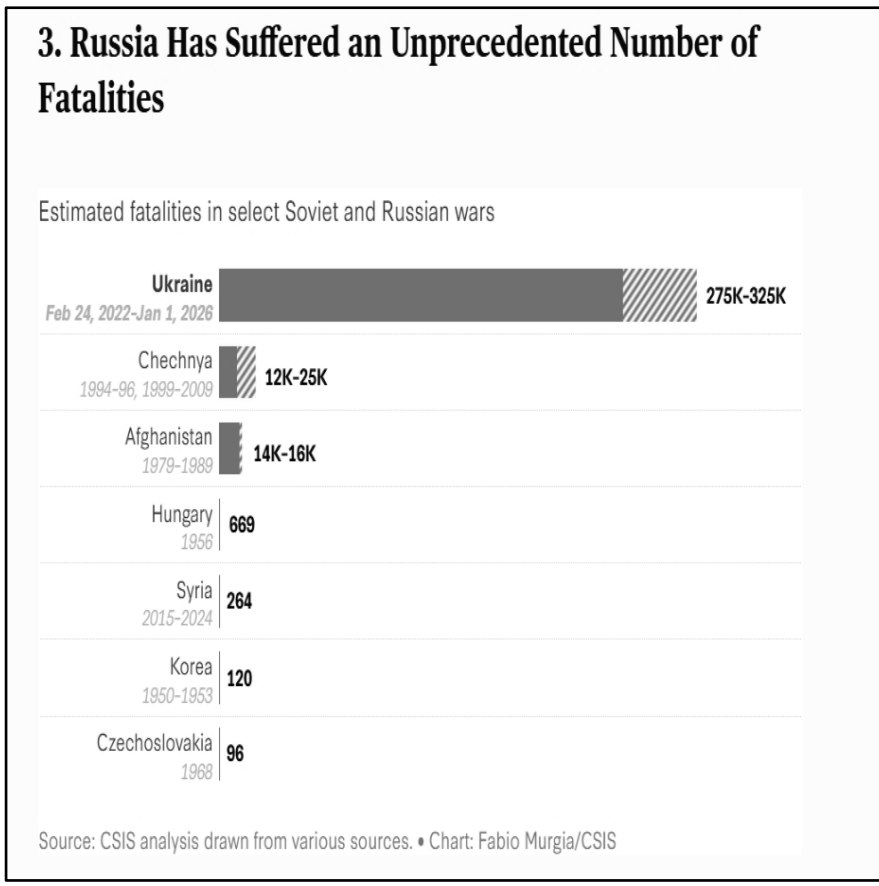


Figure 2: Comparison: Russian Fatalities in Russia-Ukraine War

Source: csis.com

The scale of attrition is particularly striking in historical perspective. Even at the lower estimates of 275,000 fatalities, Russian losses in the war in Ukraine are more than eleven times the upper estimates of the Chechen wars and over seventeen times that of the Soviet–Afghan war (Figure 2). This underscores the conflict's

extraordinary intensity and endurance and reinforces the importance of manpower, industrial capacity, and sustained force generation in contemporary warfare.

They also highlight common gaps that have become evident as the conflicts have progressed. These similarities indicate convergence in warfare, while the differences highlight critical vulnerabilities that have direct implications for force structures and preparedness.

Ammunition and Sustainment. High-intensity artillery duels in Ukraine saw an average expenditure rate of 5,000–10,000 shells per day[1], rapidly outpacing production capacities even among NATO suppliers, thus exposing severe limitations in industrial scalability. Even with significant external assistance, supply has fallen short of demand. Bottlenecks and delays have temporarily stalled operations. This highlights the limited scale of indigenous production and supply chains and the growing dependence on external support.

Asymmetry. High-tech aerial and missile defence systems have been successful but remain prohibitively expensive in the Middle East. Estimated at USD 40,000-USD 100,000 per interceptor, interceptor missiles such as those used by Iron Dome remain far more expensive than many attacking drones or rockets, which cost as little as USD 500-USD 2,000 each[2], creating a persistent cost asymmetry that favours the attacker. Over time, such asymmetry erodes sustainability. Such cost-imposition strategies enable weaker actors to offset conventional disadvantages, shifting the deterrence calculus. Asymmetry is not restricted to cost; it also includes the realms of technology application and thought. The Little Green Men afforded Russia deniability during the Crimean accession. Numerous examples of achieving asymmetry by noble means, striking strategic capabilities in deep areas, support this argument.

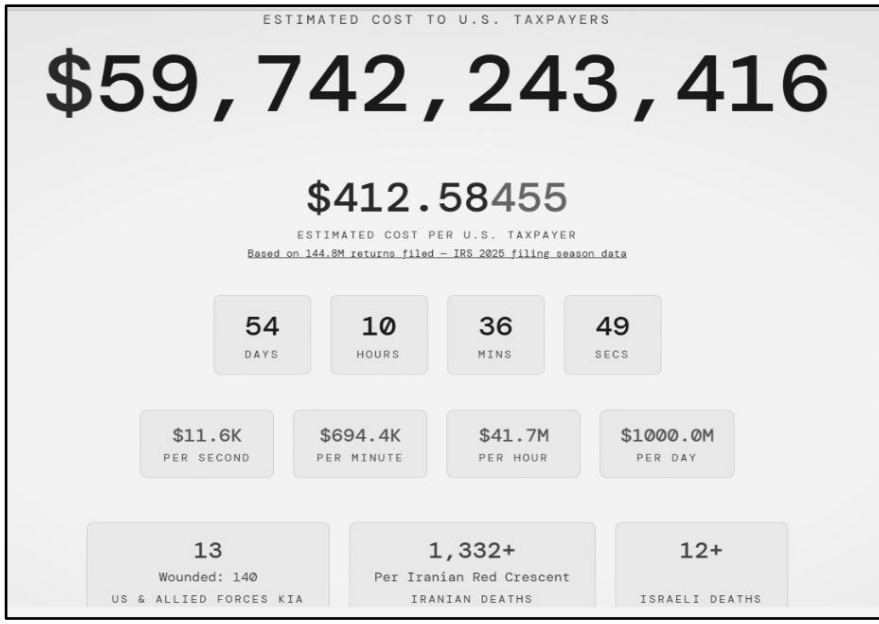


Figure 3: Estimated Cost of US-Iran-Israel Conflict on US Taxpayers as of 23 Apr 2026

Source: irancost.com

Economic Endurance. The scale of financial commitment is equally significant. Figure 3 estimates the cost of the US-Iran-Israel conflict to US taxpayers at approx. USD 59.7 billion, with the displayed expenditure reaching USD 1 billion per day. Even without extrapolating this rate over the longer term, the magnitude demonstrates how modern conflicts can rapidly translate military operations into substantial economic burdens, reinforcing the importance of financial endurance, domestic industrial capacity and strategic autonomy.

Self-Reliance Deficit. Both theatres reveal the risks of dependence on foreign ammunition, components, or specialised systems. Self-reliance and strategic autonomy are undermined when sustainment depends on foreign supply chains constrained by political and industrial considerations.

Boundaries and Battlespace. Ukraine is largely a territorial war, albeit with fluid frontlines. Conversely, the US-Israel-Iran relationship

is a borderless battlespace to include proxies, cross-border strikes, maritime and cyber actions, and long-range engagements. In the modern battlefield milieu, there is certainly no fixed frontline. What then is the significance of borders, the so-called blue, red, yellow lines? This raises a critical question for India: whether a predominantly border-centric security framework remains adequate in an increasingly diffused battle space.

Political and Senior Leadership. Recent conflicts have shown that senior military leadership and political leaders are no longer immune to selective targeting, precision strikes, cyber operations, or proxy actions. Targeting of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and top Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps leadership at the onset of hostilities marked a departure from traditional norms of leadership protection and normalising decapitation strikes on heads of state.

Global Alignment. The assumption of rigid geopolitical blocs appears increasingly untenable. Contemporary alignments are fluid and transactional, with states pursuing engagements on a case-by-case basis. The involvement of non-aligned or peripheral actors in shaping outcomes further complicates the strategic landscape, suggesting that traditional models of polarisation no longer adequately explain global conflict dynamics. Proxy warfare is the new normal. Who's fighting whom is about decoding the Chinese game of Go. And the perpetrators of terrorism could well be the mediators!

Leveraging the Geopolitical Environment and Geography. In recent conflicts, we have witnessed how Iran's Hormuz disruptions have given opportunity to Russia to circumvent US Sanctions and created an energy crisis, putting indirect pressure on the US. Russia, via Crimea domination, has created a food crisis for Europe. Both conflicts show how prolonged conflict can turn local advantages into global liabilities.

Endurance, Logistics and the Return of Attrition

Despite decades of emphasis on manoeuvre and precision, attrition has returned with force. Ukraine shows that conflicts can devolve into slugfests of guns, trenches and advance. In these wars, logistics, reserves and industrial capacity matter.

Even in theatres characterised by intermittent, high-intensity exchanges, endurance manifests through the ability to absorb shocks, sustain readiness and maintain deterrence across repeated cycles. In both instances, the determinants are the capacity to strike and the capacity to endure.

This reveals a preconceived bias that those forces optimised for decisive campaigns may be ill-equipped for protracted conflict. Peacetime stockpiles are insufficient, supply chains lack redundancy, and industrial bases are not scaled for surge production. Together, these factors create operational constraints under pressure.

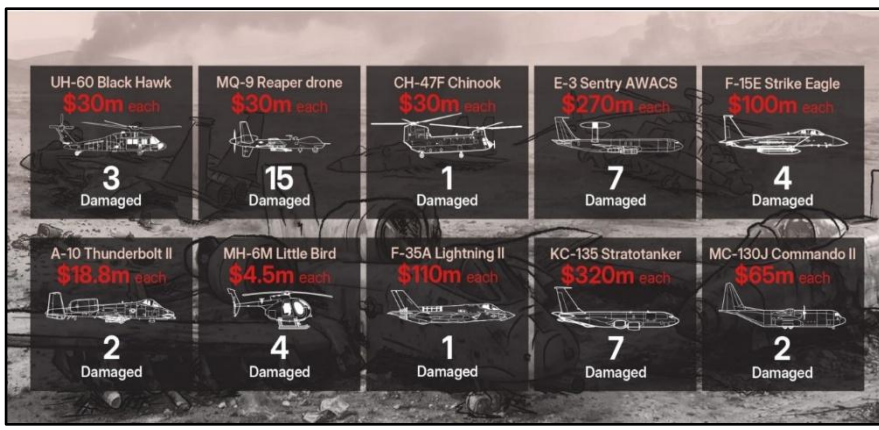


Figure 4: Estimated US losses in US-Iran-Israel conflict
Source: thenationalnews.com

Attrition: Critical Enabling Platforms. Figure 4 highlights that attrition in contemporary conflict extends beyond frontline combat platforms to the broader ecosystem that enables sustained operations. Out of 46 damaged platforms, approx. 70 per cent are Reaper drones, Airborne Warning and Control System, KC-135 tankers, and Black Hawk helicopters, exposing vulnerabilities in reconnaissance, surveillance, command and control centres, logistics, and support assets. Attrition of enabling platforms can degrade the ability to sustain and coordinate combat operations even when the principal strike platforms remain available, thereby reinforcing the importance of redundancy, dispersed capabilities and depth in force structures.

Information Warfare and the Cognitive Domain

Information warfare has emerged as a central component of modern conflict. Ukraine's ability to shape international opinion has translated into sustained political, economic and military support. Ukraine has released thousands of battlefield videos and real-time updates[3], often within minutes of engagements, creating a persistent narrative advantage. In contrast, more centralised information systems have struggled to match this speed and credibility in the digital domain. Conversely, actors with significant informational resources have struggled to dominate narratives, showing that message volume does not equal credibility or influence. Caution is warranted while interpreting information disseminated during conflict, as battlefield data and claims may be exaggerated, selectively presented, or difficult to independently verify. Such information should therefore be critically assessed and corroborated through multiple sources.

Moreover, the information environment has become decentralised and contested. Social media, open-source intelligence and rapid dissemination compress the space between event and interpretation. The cognitive domain, i.e., morale, legitimacy and perception, can influence strategic outcomes as directly as battlefield results. Yet, many militaries treat information operations as adjunct rather than integral. The role of media has increased manifold, shaping the narrative pre-conflict, telling stories during the conflict, and reinforcing claims post-conflict.

Culmination Point and Escalation Control. Some indications in these conflicts suggest that superior powers reach their culmination point before seemingly inferior powers. This, in turn, leads them to keep conflicts controlled within the escalation matrix. The nations, while wanting to assert themselves over their adversaries, remain wary of horizontal and vertical expansion of the battles.

Implications for India

Ammunition and Industrial Depth. The Ukrainian experience underscores the risk of depletion and dependency on ammunition. Sustained conflict requires assured in-house access to ammunition, spares, and critical systems at scale.

Cost Sustainability. The cost asymmetry as seen in the Middle East highlights the need for affordable defence solutions. This calls for a realistic cost-benefit analysis before induction of equipment. Indigenous development of drones, counter-drone systems and layered defences designed for favourable cost ratios is a necessity today.

Boundary Fluidity. India's security architecture is based on defined borders. However, future conflicts may not respect geography. Cyber intrusions, long-range precision strikes, space-based disruption, and proxy actions can extend the battlespace beyond the established boundaries/Line of Control/Line of Actual Control. Ergo, preparedness must be multi-domain by design. Moreover, a layered protection architecture must be conceptualised to secure national political leadership and senior military leadership.

Organisational Complexity. Multiple forces with overlapping roles across borders cause friction and inefficiency. Excessive layering across the army, central armed police forces, and other agencies risks diluting unity of effort unless clearly integrated.

Infantry Burden. The increasing weight of equipment, expectations of multi-role performance, and exposure to deep strikes place disproportionate strain on the infantry soldier. Without system-level support, ISR, mobility, protection and rapid logistics, overburdening the individual becomes a liability. The modern infantry soldier often carries 25–35 kg of equipment, raising concerns regarding mobility, fatigue and survivability in high-intensity operations. The conundrum arises whether the 'Well-equipped Soldier' is 'Equipped Well Enough' to protect the instruments of national power.

Doctrinal Importation. The temptation to replicate external models, particularly from the West, including aspects of theatreisation, must be avoided at all costs. While the grass appears greener on the other side, the adaptations must consider India's unique geography, threat profile and institutional context. Doctrinal adaptation must therefore be guided by contextual realities rather than uncritical adoption of external models.

Human Capital. A large number of experienced veterans represents an underutilised strategic asset. If systematically integrated, their operational insights can help the defence forces develop doctrines, training models, and innovations.

Strategic Thought for India. While a comprehensive National Security Strategy must guide India's strategic thought, India must recognise the need for unambiguous, clear political objectives to define her military strategies. Escalation-control mechanisms, measures to counter proxy wars, and enhanced narrative-building capability are a must. Moreover, integration and jointness should be conceptualised to enable India to leverage its geography to exploit key vulnerabilities in other nations while safeguarding India's trade and criticalities. Development of Nicobar Island allows India to leverage geography to maintain strategic autonomy and achieve strategic goals. Figure 5 illustrates the key dimensions of this imbalance in India's security architecture.

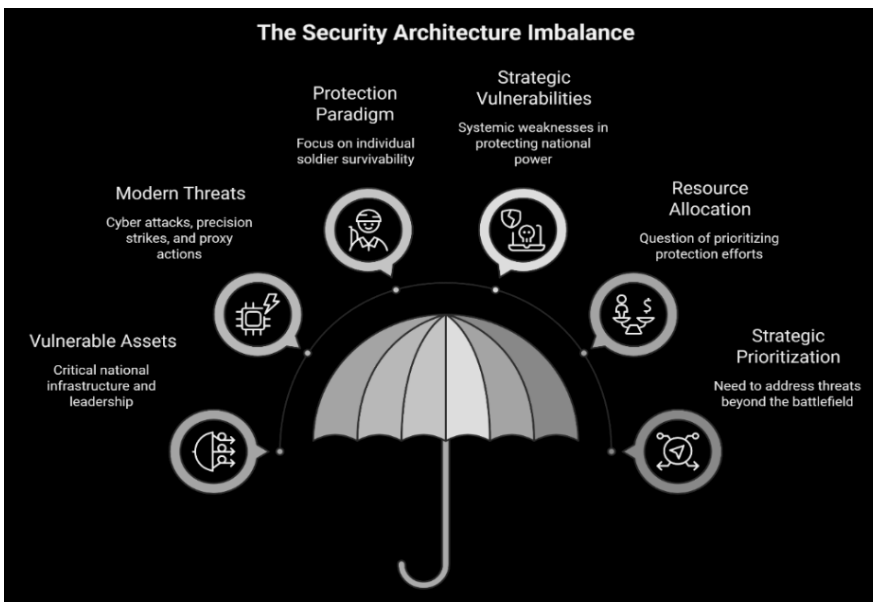


Figure 5: Imbalance in Indian Security Architecture
Source: Created by author

Way Forward

Atmanirbharta in Ammunition and Critical Systems. India needs to scale domestic production to meet wartime consumption. This entails expanding capacity for artillery shells, precision munitions, propellants, and critical components, building redundancy in supply chains and enabling surge production. Public-private partnerships, long-term offtake contracts, and technology infusion should reinforce this effort. Strategic reserves must be calibrated to meet the requirements of anticipated high-intensity scenarios.

Cost-Effective Drone Ecosystem with Repair Depth. Indigenous development and mass production of drones must be addressed progressively. Apart from the platforms, it must also include battery systems, sensors, communication links, and repair infrastructure. This will ensure rapid turnaround and reduced dependence on external suppliers. Rapid repair cycles, modular design, and local spares reduce lifecycle costs and improve sustainability. Counter-drone solutions should be layered and economical, combining soft and hard-kill measures.

Multi-Domain Preparedness Beyond Borders. The extension of wars and conflicts into all domains, including cyber and space, is a reality. Thus, investments in resilient communications, satellite redundancy, cyber capabilities and deep-strike capabilities need to be dovetailed as essential complements to border-centric readiness. Borders remain vital, but they may no longer be sufficient on their own.

Thinking Purple. While jointness is essential, the structures being evolved must be contextualised to India. Theatre commands, when adopted, should be tailored with clear mandates, unified logistics, shared ISR, and interoperable networks, without blindly importing models unsuited to India's terrain and threat spectrum. Integration should reduce duplication and friction without creating any new layers.

Rationalised Force Posture at Borders. The roles of army and central armed police forces must be clearly defined to ensure unity of effort. It is time to evolve from symbolic coordination to integrated

command structures supported by unified situational awareness. Integrated command and control, shared situational awareness, and streamlined logistics can overcome existing gaps and enhance responsiveness.

Reconceptualising Infantry Roles. The traditional model of infantry centred on the individual soldier as the primary bearer of combat capability is increasingly inadequate for modern warfare. Today's infantryman is expected to operate in a complex, technology-driven battlespace, yet the system still places disproportionate responsibility on him. Simply adding more equipment or protection does not resolve this imbalance. The requirement is to embed specialised capabilities at the unit level, viz., drones, electronic warfare, and enhanced mobility, so that the burden shifts from the individual to the system.

Leveraging the Geopolitical Environment and Geography. India must develop Nicobar Island to enhance its military footprint in the Andaman Sea. This will act as a strategic outpost, enhancing India's ability to secure sea lanes, project military power, monitor rivals, and make independent geopolitical decisions. This will, in turn, bolster India's strategic autonomy.

Information Warfare as a Core Function. Establish integrated capabilities for strategic communication, counter-disinformation, and narrative shaping. In today's era, narrative shaping is as important as the fighting itself. Partnerships with media, technology platforms and civil society can amplify reach while maintaining integrity.

Veteran Integration. Create mechanisms to harness veterans' expertise in doctrine development, training design, red-teaming, and innovation. Their experience can prove vital in creating new frameworks, architectures, and mechanisms.

Defence within Viksit Bharat. The economy needs to be one of the strongest pillars of this overarching concept of comprehensive national security. A Viksit nation requires a resilient defence industrial base, a skilled workforce, and an innovation ecosystem. In essence, defence manufacturing, research, and supply chains should be integral to national development planning, not treated as peripherals. Figure 6 consolidates the key strategic initiatives outlined above.

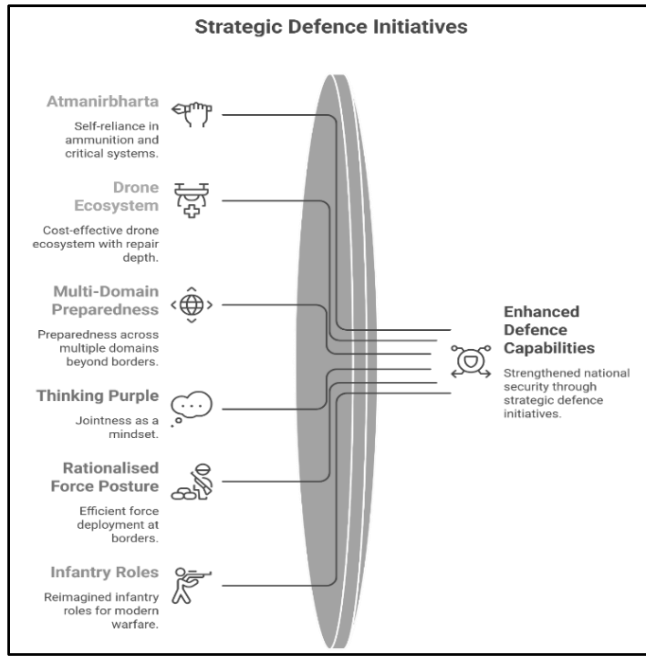


Figure 6: The Way Forward
Source: Created by author

Conclusion

Contemporary conflicts show that modern warfare is defined not only by decisive battles but also by endurance, cost, and complexity. Ammunition shortfalls, dependence on external supply chains, unfavourable cost ratios, incomplete integration and boundary-less operations are structural features of the contemporary world.[4]

For India, the imperative is to take proactive, not reactive, steps in this regard. *Atmanirbharta* (Self-reliance) in defence production, especially in sectors of ammunition, drones, and engines, is a must. Also, integrating technology into various systems, preparing for multi-domain, boundary-devoid conflicts, and systematically using human capital should go hand in hand.[5] This calls for a Whole of Nation approach, with greater military-civil-academia-industry fusion to harness expertise, innovation, and resources across sectors. Equally important is aligning defence preparedness with the broader vision

of *Viksit Bharat*, ensuring that economic strength underwrites strategic autonomy.

Most importantly, future conflicts are unlikely to conform to established norms of geography, duration, or intensity. Therefore, in this nouvelle era, the ability to sustain operations, absorb costs and adapt dynamically will be more decisive than the ability to achieve rapid battlefield success. Preparedness must therefore be rooted in the realities of prolonged, complex and multi-domain conflict.

> *"The key is not to be the strongest or the fastest, but to be the most adaptable. Victory goes to the side that can change faster than the other".*
>
> ***— John Boyd***

Endnotes

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