

# A Swift and Decisive Victory: The Strategic Implications of What Victory Means

by CPT Chong Shi Hao

## Abstract:

The development of the Third Generation Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has been for the primary purpose of deterring a potential adversary and achieving victory if war does break out. This mission statement serves as a guide for the SAF's defense policy and also its transformation efforts. It is important to be clear about what this "victory" entails. The adjectives "swift and decisive" help to further illuminate the nature of this victory that we seek to obtain. This article aims to add clarity to what this victory should look like, in the light of recent events and the evolution of modern warfare.

*Keywords: Fourth Generation Warfare; New Media; Third Generation SAF; Total Defence*

## INTRODUCTION

*"The mission of MINDEF and the Singapore Armed Forces is to enhance Singapore's peace and security through deterrence and diplomacy, and should these fail, to secure a swift and decisive victory over the aggressor."*

The development of the Third Generation Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has been for the primary purpose of deterring a potential adversary and achieving victory if war does break out. This mission statement serves as a guide for the SAF's defence policy and also its transformation efforts. It is important to be clear about what this "victory" entails. The adjectives "swift and decisive" help to further illuminate the nature of this victory that we seek to obtain. As Clausewitz puts succinctly, "no one starts a war or rather no one in his senses ought to do so without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it."

This article aims to add clarity to what this victory should look like, in the light of recent events and the evolution of modern warfare. It aims to help us be clear about the victory we want to achieve (What is winning?). The definition of the victory SAF aims to accomplish has to be re-examined within the context

of today's debate over the future of war. The texture and nature of this victory have obvious implications for our conduct of war—strategy, operations and tactics (How to win?)—and also how we tailor the future transformation of the SAF to meet what this victory requires (How we prepare ourselves to win?). The main thesis is that as warfare evolves, our notion of victory must adapt accordingly. Most importantly, a victory has to create the right conditions that will engender enduring peace and a positive strategic outcome. Indeed, what matters then is the strategic outcome, a victory that is not just an operational and tactical one but also goes beyond the battlefield. This is exemplified by the conversation between Colonel Harry Summers and a North Vietnamese officer, as COL Summers commented, "[t]he United States (US) had won all the battles," to which the North Vietnamese replied, "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant."<sup>1</sup>

Victory is perceived subjectively rather than objectively based on tangible measures. This perception is in turn shaped by traditional media and, more importantly now, the new social media. Being able to manage social tools such as Twitter, Facebook and Youtube is crucial to shaping regional and international perceptions of victory. Rupert Smith likened conducting military operations to being "on a

stage, in an amphitheatre or Roman arena.”<sup>2</sup> He argues that the media must be an integral part of planning, because it is the audience who decides whether the overall show is a success.

Our conduct of war will have to address this.

This article will first discuss the socio-political context and developments in which SAF may fight. This affects the definition of victory. It will then be applied to our conduct of war in the pursuit of this victory.

## TODAY’S CONTEXT

*“We are not likely to get the future right. We just need to make sure we don’t get it too wrong.”*

– General James Mattis, USMC, Joint Forces Command<sup>3</sup>

The nature of war has remained fundamentally unchanged throughout history, although the waging of warfare has evolved concomitantly with society and changing technology.<sup>4</sup> This is also why we find the writings of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz so abiding and applicable even after so many years. Warfare has developed from the Napoleonic legions to static trench warfare to today’s precision and network-centric warfare. War is a strategic concept while warfare is a tactical concept.<sup>5</sup> The way we conduct warfare must meet the purposes of the war we plan to win. The kind of victory and how we should seek it has to be adapted to new circumstances.

## Hybrid vs. Fourth Generation Warfare

The current debate especially, among US scholars and military practitioners, remains a US-centric view of future threats. However, there are some insights that can be gleaned. Fourth-Generation Warfare (4GW), according to Lind, is a return to warfare before nation-states existed as political entities that fought each other.<sup>6</sup> There were religious, cultural, linguistic and racial groups, not just nation-states. 4GW practitioners choose targets with a mental and moral impact on the political will of their enemies in order

to induce them to give up their strategic goals. They concentrate on crafting a persuasive message, rather than destroy the material power of their enemy.

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Hybrid warfare, whose main advocator is Hoffman, argues that war is moving towards a convergence of categories,<sup>7</sup> a blurring of neat distinctions between conventional and irregular, combat actions

and nation-building, terrorism and sabotage by commandos or paramilitaries. Furthermore, hybrid war can be conducted by states as well as non-state actors that share the same strategic interests, making a war against them complex and intractable.<sup>8</sup> It becomes both an advantage for the country who can wage asymmetric and conventional warfare simultaneously, through the use of their uniformed soldiers and civilian-dressed irregulars. The problem Hoffman raised was that armies tend to settle for elegant categories of threats and fail to acknowledge the complex “blending of threats that could exist.”<sup>9</sup>

While the SAF has adopted the Full Spectrum Operations concept, with different Services fulfilling certain operations, we need to acknowledge the possibility that in theatre we have to perform the whole gamut of missions simultaneously. This entails having flexible mindsets on what we are supposed to do and possessing adaptable skills. Colin Gray warns that the danger for defence policymakers is developing solutions for challenges they prefer and find easy to solve, rather than what their adversaries are most likely to do.<sup>10</sup> Assuming that our potential adversary will always fight conventionally is an assumption we need to be wary of. Knowing this, our adversary can exploit racial, religious and linguistic fissures to their full advantage, requiring us to prepare for a form of “hybrid war where adversaries attempt to simultaneously employ traditional, disruptive, catastrophic and/or irregular capabilities to attain their objectives.”<sup>11</sup>

## Humanization of Warfare

Societies around the world are generally becoming post-modern in culture, attitudes and values. Singapore is no exception in today's global village. Postmodernism has led to a more humane society with a greater emphasis on individual rights, autonomy, diversity and a reduced emphasis on authority.<sup>12</sup> The older generation often criticize the Army as having gone "soft"; rather, we have actually become more humane in our training.

Postmodernism has changed society's view of war. Today's public demands a more stringent use of force by their armed forces and is wary of sending soldiers into harm's way.<sup>13</sup> Christopher Coker argues that the accumulated impact is the humanization of warfare.<sup>14</sup> Greater individualism and greater importance attached to humanity in war (evidenced by the dramatic decrease in the cost of human lives today) have made it the duty of generals to keep their soldiers alive for as long as possible. He argues that "the modern battlefield has no place for the 'bloody boots on the ground realists who insist you cannot win without planting the flag on enemy turf while wading in the blood of your comrades.'"<sup>15</sup>

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What then is the implication of this process? A military is not divorced from society but shares its attitudes. The fear is that the concern for human lives, itself a laudable thing, can become so overwhelming that force protection becomes emphasised over the aggressive tactics required for mission success. Part of the solution has been the increasing reliance on technology to deliver the goods (such as unmanned robots and precision guided munitions). The revulsion

felt towards excessive loss of human lives is valid, and it is the commanders' responsibility to use economy of force to achieve their mission. However, casualty aversion can become a problem. In the Bosnian war, the senior officers saw casualties as an indicator of the operation's failure and as a result, made force protection an imperative over restoring peace in the region. In the end, war criminals were not pursued, community building projects stalled and patrols were cancelled because all these entailed sending in foot soldiers and endangering their lives.<sup>16</sup> Casualty aversion also underpins the desire of politicians to set timelines and formulate exit strategies, which can imperil the success of a mission.

## Industrial Society vs. Information Society

Many parts of the world are progressing from an industrial to a networked or information society. An information society is one in which the production, diffusion and consumption of information dominates the cultural, economic and political spheres of life in the country.<sup>17</sup> This shift from the tangible to the intangible forms the basis of economic and socio-political life and has pronounced repercussions on how victory is sought. In a state-to-state war, the Clausewitzian center of gravity may no longer be the material basis of the country, i.e. the capital cities and the industries, as was the case in the two world wars. The center has shifted to the information sphere—the media, the hearts and minds of the populace. No doubt it will still be critical to target the infrastructure of the enemy, but they are less strategic in achieving victory when compared to having influence in the information domain.

One noteworthy aspect of this is the powerful use of social media tools by citizens around the world to amplify their efforts in opposing the state. The proliferation of image capturing devices empowers every person into becoming a potential security risk, intelligence gatherer and journalist. Everyone with a camera phone is able to capture and upload information to the internet and circulate it instantaneously throughout the world via online social networks

such as Facebook and Twitter. This poses immense challenges for governments. Recent examples testify to the impact of social media. The Iranian opposition managed to capture the world's attention by using mobile phones to record atrocities committed by the Basiji paramilitaries and the Republican Guard units. The most notable is the shooting of Neda Agha-Soltan, whose "martyrdom" for the opposition's cause was mobilized as a powerful rallying symbol for the Green movement. These were then widely circulated on the Internet and provoked a global outcry against the Iranian establishment. Therefore, ethical misconduct, human rights abuses and atrocities will destroy any prospect of strategic victory even if the enemy is defeated.

### Swift and Decisive?

The US forces achieved a swift and decisive win over the conventional Iraqi Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom. This win was proclaimed by then-President George Bush, who landed on *USS Kittyhawk* declaring "mission accomplished." Retrospectively, no one today will still claim that it was victory, for a bloody insurgency ensued and more US servicemen were killed after that declaration on 1 May 2003 than during the initial advance.<sup>18</sup> The Iraq war hence elicit two cautionary notes for any leadership:<sup>19</sup> one can "win the war but lose the peace," and how one wins the war can determine whether one wins the peace.



President George Bush declaring "Mission Accomplished" on board *USS Kittyhawk*

Both hybrid warfare and 4GW unanimously agree that future wars will be slow, lengthy and cumbersome, as opposed to clinical like Operation Desert Storm.<sup>20</sup> One main reason for this is the post-conflict obligation imposed on the victor to rebuild a war-torn area lest it becomes the breeding ground for future troublemakers. Humanization of warfare has made it incumbent on the occupier to rebuild what they have destroyed so that the civilians can maintain their basic right to a decent living.

The concept of swift and decisive wars might be anachronistic, if not an anomaly, in history. Indeed, "statistically, this heuristic notion is clearly an anomaly, and historically, it may be nothing more than a grossly simplified recollection of some of those wars that disproportionately shape our understanding of the term."<sup>21</sup> Immediate examples would be World War Two and the first Gulf War. Therefore, we can aim for a swift end to the war, but not victory. For the victory to be decisive, it has to meet two conditions, according to Michael Howard, "first, the defeated people must accept the fact of defeat and realize there is no chance of reversing the verdict in the foreseeable future, whether by military revival, skilful diplomacy or international propaganda. Second, they must become reconciled to their defeat by being treated as partners in operating the new international order."<sup>22</sup>

### VICTORY IN TODAY'S CONTEXT

Victory has become a shorthand and catch-all term for many scholars and policymakers in describing positive outcomes in war.<sup>23</sup> This becomes problematic when we begin to confuse operational and tactical success with a victory that can serve the country's interests. It is more than just defeating our adversary on the battlefield. Not being clear about the kind of victory we want will result in catastrophic consequences for the country. The key point here is that we need to do more than win the battles the SAF potentially has to fight.

### What is Victory?

*"It is no doubt a good thing to conquer on the field of battle ... it needs greater wisdom and great skill to make use of victory."*

– Polybius<sup>24</sup>

Victory in war is not winning, to put it simply. Victory is based on an assessment and not a fact.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, there is a subjective element to it that depends on the perception of various factors, such as the domestic and adversary's population, international and regional political leadership and community.<sup>26</sup> Naturally, this still has to be buttressed by winning battles, which is objective because it involves pitting material against material—soldiers, platforms, firepower. Clausewitz said victory is tripartite and consist of three elements namely 1) the enemy's loss of material strength 2) his loss of morale and 3) his open admission of the above by giving up his intentions.<sup>27</sup>

We can envisage victory as a continuum or sliding scale of outcomes, rather than as a simplistic binary of victory and defeat.<sup>28</sup> The second way is to dissect victory into various levels—tactical, operational and strategic—or, as Martel prefers, tactical, political-military, and grand strategic. In his encapsulation, tactical success refers to what the military achieves on the battlefield while political-military encompass the change in the adversary's political behavior caused by the cumulative effect of many tactical wins. The last is a victory of "such magnitude that it leads to a profound reordering in the strategic foundations of international politics," when the "ideological and moral values of a society" are destroyed and "the foundations of the enemy state" are re-established.<sup>29</sup>

Bartholomees prescribes a more toned down version of strategic victory (perhaps less grand compared to Martel's), saying that "strategic victory in war is a positive assessment of the postwar political situation in terms of achievement and decisiveness that is acknowledged, sustainable, and resolves underlying political issues."<sup>30</sup>

### The Victory SAF Should Aim For

Based on the discussion so far, this is what our victory should look like:

1. The victory we should aim for should be akin to Martel's political-military level and Bartholomees' definition of the strategic victory. There must be tactical and operational success, which predicates on more tangible metrics of amount of enemy

territory seized, number of casualties and their loss of equipment. These are military objectives that underlay the foundation of victory.

2. Because of the information society we reside in, we need to manage interpretations of our war effort in order to generate victory. This pertains to perspective, and we need target domestic and regional populations, as well as international political leaders through careful utilization of different media channels. This is also the cognitive domain of war.
3. Humanization of warfare prohibits indiscriminate destruction of civilian lives and property. The war has to be ethical and right. This is the moral domain of war.
4. The peace that comes with the end of hostilities must be enduring and allow the successful rebuilding of affected areas. A picture of stability and hope is necessary for victory to be perceived.
5. We need to translate this victory into long-term political gains for the country.

## THE CONDUCT OF WAR

As Rupert Smith argues in his seminal book *The Utility of Force*, wars can no longer be won through the application of pure military force.<sup>31</sup> We as soldiers who stand at the tip of the spear have to conduct the war in a manner that does not subvert the prospects of lasting peace.<sup>32</sup>

### Tactical

As Lasica argues, "The hybrid warrior seeks to quickly convert their tactical success and their enemy's mistakes into strategic effects through deliberate exploitation of the cognitive and moral domains. Hybrid war is a strategy and a tactic, a form of war and warfare."<sup>33</sup> Online social media has become a powerful platform for citizen journalism in the current information society. One should expect this in any area of operations we are in. Soldiers need to be aware that the aggregation of their individual actions can have an impact on the perception of how the war has been fought. Disparate acts of inhumanity and



atrocities recorded by civilians with camera mobile phones and propagated on viral social networks abroad will paint a negative picture of our operations. This will taint whatever success we have in operations and affect the sense of victory.

Much thus depends on the values of our individual soldiers. Their ethical conduct in war towards enemy combatants and civilians will contribute to the sense of victory, especially so when viewed by the international community. On the contrary, tactical mistakes such as the air strike ordered by a German officer that killed 142 civilians in Afghanistan will certainly be exploited.<sup>34</sup>

### Operational

Our conduct of media operations will be as crucial as our execution of battles on the ground. The media front will consist of traditional mediums and the new media—Twitter, Facebook and Youtube. The same point made above can in turn be used against the enemy. Their mistakes and misconduct, if filmed, can be used against them. We should not leave the framing of our war effort to chance. We should set the structure, tone and plot of the ongoing narrative in the public sphere, local and international. For example, Al-Jazeera's focus on broadcasting visceral images of suffering Iraqis and Palestinians decisively shape the public opinion of the Arab world, framing the message of a medieval Crusade against the Muslim world. A narrative that paints our operations in a negative light will not help us in achieving a decisive victory. The challenge would be crafting a calibrated message that does not seem like propaganda and yet nuanced enough to persuade others to be on our side. Indeed, the media is itself a weapon we must wield to our advantage.

An example of an operational failure would be the raid by the Israeli commandos on a flotilla bound for Gaza.<sup>35</sup> The ostensible aim of the convoy was to bring aid

to Gaza, but it really was trying to focus international attention on the Israeli blockade. The Israelis launched an assault on it, oblivious to the filming of its actions by an Al-Jazeera crew on board the ship. It did not matter that the crew on board used violence first. What the world saw was Israel's willingness to confront the flotilla with disproportionate force, regardless of its purpose. This incident showed how the international public opinion was shaped by media and strengthened the hands of the activists. It also demonstrated the Israeli failure to understand the larger, perhaps strategic context of the operation.

Stability operations involving rebuilding war torn rear areas should start immediately as the front line advances. This should take a leaf from the US experience in Iraq. We can leverage on the strong inter-agency collaboration honed over the years through the organization of National Day Parades, Youth Olympics, etc., working with civilian agencies and international non-governmental organisations to quickly bring aid, funds and material to rebuild areas that have been destroyed, as and when they are stabilised. The faster a semblance of stability can be established, the more difficult it will be for insurgents to take advantage and mount asymmetric warfare. Rebuilding should be carried concomitantly as war proceeds, though it is acknowledged that it will be a huge strain on finite resources. This can be mitigated by quickly roping in international aid agencies to facilitate recovery processes in rear areas. If swift stability can be brought to the affected civilian populace, it may also break their will to oppose our aims and bring about a sustained eventual victory. This is necessary to create enduring peace. Indeed, rebuilding is our onus and unavoidable responsibility if victory is our aim.

### Strategic – Creating the Right Political Conditions

Firstly, battlefield success alone does not determine the outcome of wars, but provides political opportunities for the victors.<sup>36</sup> Military operations

must be tempered with political tolerance and moderation so as to make such a victory acceptable to the defeated. The waging of the war must take place in tandem with strict political control in order to create the conditions for lasting peace, as aforementioned. To win, one achieves his immediate political goals, but to be victorious one must resolve all underlying issues such as the motivations and the catalyst that led to war in the first place.<sup>37</sup> We need to know what the political goals are and the military objectives must serve these goals.<sup>38</sup> However, the political goals cannot be too clearly defined, and must be achievable, realistic and leave enough ambiguity and broadness to accept a range of end states at the end of the war. Being able to openly declare how we have achieved our goals is vital to the collective sense of victory.

We also need to understand the enemy's theory of victory, so as not to play into his hands. For example, Hezbollah in its 2006 conflict with Israel could claim victory merely by surviving the Israeli onslaught,<sup>39</sup> whereas the Israelis sought to recover their kidnapped soldiers, destroy Hezbollah and kill its leader Hassan Nasrallah. The IDF failed in all three aims.<sup>40</sup> It was over-ambitious and thus set itself up for failure. Nasrallah certainly underestimated Israel's vehement response but turned the situation around by the skilful manipulation of the media.

Furthermore, the defeated must accept the verdict as cooperation from them is necessary for success to be exploited.<sup>41</sup> World War II can be argued to be the continuation of the disastrous handling of the First War's aftermath by the allies at Versailles as the German people did not internalize their defeat and perceived the loss as a betrayal by their political leaders. Thus, open admission of defeat, as stated in Clausewitz's trinity of victory, cannot be limited only to the politicians but must be an admission by the people as well.

If peace is the desired outcome and war is the aberration, then victory should lead to an enduring peaceful state. We ought to ask ourselves what are our post-conflict obligations. Should we be able to bring a swift end to hostilities, our active participation in post-war rebuilding will be crucial in securing our long term political interests in having a friendly and prosperous friend. The temporal impermanence of victory needs to be considered as it can be squandered away.

## CONCLUSION

We are in good stead to tackle these developments. Our five aspects of Total Defence is prescient and far-sighted (Military, civil, economic, social and psychological).<sup>42</sup> They create a bulwark against a coherent and multi-prong hybrid attack. Hypothetically, the adversary can commit terrorist attacks on our home soil while a larger scale war is fought on another front, in an attempt to erode the will of the population to fight. He could also sow discord among racial and religious groups to compound the effect. This is where social and psychological defence play a crucial role in warding off such attacks.

We will continue to train soldiers to have well-anchored values and commanders who are adaptive and flexible should remain as a key focus. They also have to be resilient to endure and face the uncertainties of the future battlefield.<sup>43</sup> They will face greater scrutiny on the battlefield as a result of the all-pervasive influence of traditional and new media. The emphasis on individual leadership becomes salient, as small units become more dispersed in urban fighting environments.

Indeed, changing technology and socio-political developments drive the way wars are fought and won. Hybridization and humanization of warfare affect how we conduct war. Information societies have shifted the Clausewitzian centre of gravity from the tangible to the immaterial, especially with the advent of social media. The cognitive and moral domains of

war have superseded the importance of the tangible and material metrics that used to dominate military calculations. These developments implore us to re-examine our notions of victory, given its place in SAF's mission statement. A swift and decisive success on the battlefield have to be capitalised to translate to a victory in a political and strategic sense. This is especially important for the post-combat phase, as perception of victory often depends on what happens in the aftermath. Ultimately, this hard earned victory should lead to enduring peace and not a transient one. 🌐

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