The Concept Of A Decisive Battle And The Key Takeaways For The Singapore Armed Forces

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Abstract:

The essay argues that a decisive battle, that is, a battle that allows for a swift and decisive victory, does not, in itself, decide the outcome of war but, it can provide the operational advantage over the adversaries to accelerate the end of the war. This is illustrated through Commanding General Ulysses S. Grant’s strategies in the American Civil War. In addition, decisive battles are no longer confined to the traditional battle space and are not solely dependent on the use of hard power, as illustrated by the Battle of Fallujah. The author concludes that in order to astutely apply the concept of decisive battles in its strategies, the Singapore Armed Forces needs to be clear on our nation’s concept of victory, continue honing our information operations capability and ensure that our professional military education syllabi are designed to groom military professionals who can think, reflect and analyse.

Keywords: Modern Warfare; Victory; Art of War; Strategy; Power

INTRODUCTION

A rapid battlefield victory has traditionally been the aim of conventional operational warfare. From the German army in 1914, with its objective of a six-week victory over France, through the German blitzkrieg in World War Two (WWII) to Israel’s Six Day War against Egypt in 1967, the goal of these military operations has been to achieve a rapid operational victory. This need to achieve a quick victory of annihilation is made even more critical to countries that lack strategic depth where, because of their size, any operational defeat would automatically have the gravest strategic consequences for the country.¹ Singapore is one example and this need to achieve “a swift and decisive victory” is explicitly spelt out in the mission statement of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF).² However, the ways and means of achieving a swift and decisive victory is not as straightforward as it seems. Often times, we tend to embrace the idea of decisive battle as the key towards achieving a decisive victory. This relationship is valid but in our application, we tend to be overly simplistic and neglect to consider the contextual factors. Today, we are increasingly operating in a politically kaleidoscopic strategic environment where the value of hard power is no longer absolute and the strategic narrative is proving its utility as an effective means of warfare. Unless we start distilling and embracing the essence of the decisive battle in reality, its full potential will not be realised and the goal of achieving a swift and decisive victory will be impeded.

DECONSTRUCTING THE IDEAL DECISIVE BATTLE

Our misconception of the decisive battle largely stems from a misinterpretation of the Clausewitzian paradigm of war. Clausewitz, in his seminal work On
War, started by defining war as “a duel on a larger scale” and as “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.” He goes on to emphasise the need to exert the “maximum use of force” and added that “since time began, only great victories have paved the way for great results.” By beginning with this perspective, Clausewitz had created an impression that the results in battle decide the outcome of war. More specifically, he highlighted that the use of overwhelming offensive force was the most effective way to compel the enemy into submission and win the war. Up to this point, a superficial read of Clausewitz will result in two misconceptions. First, decisive battle will produce rapid and decisive strategic results and second, decisive battle can create permanent outcomes. This over-simplistic mindset misses the forest for the trees and clearly ignores the complexities and uncertainties associated with war, a point that Clausewitz made in subsequent sections of his book. In actual fact, Clausewitz’s intent by beginning with framing war in its ideal form was to bring out the uncertainties in reality. This was clearly emphasised by Clausewitz when he duly noted that as we “move from the abstract to the real world…the whole thing looks quite different.”

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Another fallacy that we have often fallen prey to, is the belief that decisive battles will end the war and result in lasting peace. However, as Clausewitz puts it, “in war, the result is never final…even the ultimate outcome of war is not always to be regarded as final.” The Battle of Austerlitz has often been cited as the quintessential example of the ideal decisive battle where, despite being numerically weaker, Napoleon and his Grande Armee of France annihilated the larger Russian and Austrian armies and brought the War of the Third Coalition to a rapid end. However, if it is true that decisive battles can produce permanent outcomes, then results of the Battle of Austerlitz should have prevented the War of the Fourth and Fifth Coalition from happening. Unfortunately, it did not and Napoleon would go on to be defeated. History would go on to repeat itself when “Israel’s stunning success in 1967 turned to dust in the blood bath of 1973, so too did Saddam Hussein’s launching of the Iraqi armies in 1980 [which] result[ed] in needless slaughter—and decided nothing.”

In summary, by closely studying Clausewitz, there are two key takeaways. First, in reality, war is complex and uncertain. There are just too many different factors affecting “the outcome of a battle, campaign, or series of campaigns that can rarely all favor a quick [and decisive] result.” Second, war is an interactive affair between emotional living forces. Therefore, outcomes are never permanent and governments must “never assume that its country’s fate, its whole existence, hangs on the outcome of a single battle, no matter how decisive.” Outcomes are just “transitory evil from which a remedy may still be found…at some later date.” However, this is not to say that the concept of decisive battle is a fallacy. More accurately speaking, decisive battles do exist in reality but in a different form and substance.
DECISIVE BATTLE IN REALITY

In reality, decisive battles do not decide the outcome of war but they allow military forces to gain a marked operational advantage over their adversaries and help accelerate the end of war. This value of decisive battle was duly noted by Clausewitz when he highlighted that “we regard a great battle as a decisive factor in the outcome of a war or campaign, but not necessarily as the only one.” Simply put, a decisive battle in reality is not about “decision in battle” but “advantage in war.” This can be illustrated through Commanding General Ulysses S. Grant’s strategies in the American Civil War. Unlike General Robert Edward Lee of the Confederates, Commanding General Grant “entertained no illusions about being able to destroy enemy armies in a single battle” and viewed “battles as means rather than as ends.” This was evident in the Vicksburg Campaign of 1862-1863 where the Union fought five battles enroute to Vicksburg but none of these battles were considered to be decisive in Commanding General Grant’s strategy. Instead, these battles, such as the Battle of Port Gibson, were considered critical in providing the Union with the operational advantage in achieving the overall objective of conquering Vicksburg. Similarly, the Battle of Midway in 1942 did not rapidly bring about the end of WWII but, it did allow the United States (US) Forces in the Pacific to gain an operational advantage over the Japanese and signalled the turning point of the war in favour of the Allied Forces.

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In addition, decisive battles are no longer confined to the traditional battle space (air, land and sea) and are not restricted to the use of physical force. With the introduction of cyber conflict as one of the new features.
domains of warfare, the idea of using computers as a viable means of decisive battle is picking up pace in recent times. One such idea is the Acupuncture War, a term first coined in a 1997 People’s Liberation Army Defence University publication, describing a paralysing massive cyber-attack designed to make the “first battle the last battle.” The growing influence of information technology in warfare has also expanded the battle space and seeded the idea that combat in the 21st century has transited from a ‘battle of wills’ to a ‘battle of ideas’. The US experience in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) best exemplifies this point. In 2004, the US military leadership believed that occupying and winning the Battle of Fallujah would be decisive, but they quickly discovered that the insurgents did not interpret the battle in the same way. US forces sought to annihilate Al Qaeda in Fallujah, yet quickly found that through social media and the internet, alternative ideas had already spread throughout the region which brought thousands of foreign fighters to Al Qaeda’s cause. While Fallujah was a tactical victory, it was “just the opening salvo” of a brutal war of ideas. In sum, decisive battles are not confined to the realms of the traditional battle space and ‘wielding the hammer’ is no longer the best means to achieve decisive victories. The value and characteristics of decisive battles in reality is attributed to three contextual factors: the increasing politically kaleidoscopic environment, the reducing value of hard power and the growing utility of strategic narratives.

THE INCREASING POLITICALLY KALEIDOSCOPIC STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

The strategic environment has changed. The contemporary strategic environment is characterised by “rising mass passions fuelled by various forces—economic success, national pride, higher levels of education, greater access to information with higher level of transparency and memories of the past.” Zbignew Brzezinski once termed this modern phenomenon as the “global political awakening” and warned that “for the first time in history almost all of humanity is politically activated, politically conscious and politically interactive.” Emile Simpson takes Brzezinski’s point further by describing how this “global political awakening” has changed the strategic environment where 21st century combat is now taking place in a “fragmented [and] politically kaleidoscopic battle space.” This challenges our traditional understanding of war and directly impacts the value of the decisive battle.

Traditionally, war has often been understood as a polarised contest. This can be seen through Clausewitz’s definition of war where he defines war as “a duel on a larger scale” and uses the analogy of a pair of wrestlers to emphasise the idea of polarity in war. The concept of polarity is important in the traditional understanding of war because it clearly identifies a winner and a loser as the decisive battle provides the means for a nation to accomplish its strategic objective and gain a decisive victory. For example, in WWII, there were no questions about who the winners and losers were. However, the same cannot be said about the Vietnam War, the Korean War or, more recently, OEF. This is because in a politically kaleidoscopic environment, war takes place in a fragmented environment where there are no clear polarities, no clearly opposing objectives and, as a result, no mutually exclusive outcomes. In other words, results in decisive battles are not as significant at the strategic level as originally thought.

The situation is further compounded by the effects of globalisation where it “catalyses the importance of strategic audience who are external to one’s state or the enemy’s state.” The emergence of this group of
strategic audience who is not aligned to either side of war further blurs the definition of winning or losing, reduces the value of hard power and emphasises the need for a coherent strategic narrative.

**THE REDUCING VALUE OF HARD POWER**

War in the Clausewitzian paradigm assumes that the adversary has a low tolerance for casualties. To exploit the opponent’s casualty adverse mentality, Clausewitz calls for the “maximum use of force” in order to compel the enemy into submission.24 Unfortunately, such an assumption neglects to consider other motivational forces that might impel the enemy to accept a high casualty rate. Nationalism is one such motivational force and the Japanese and the Viet Congs are examples of such adversaries.

During the later stages of WWII, the Japanese were subjected to incendiary attacks by the Allied Forces to little effect. Despite being hit across 66 cities, resulting in the deaths of 330,000 Japanese civilians and with 8.5 million made homeless, the will of the Japanese hardly cracked.25 This finding was captured in the 1944 MacArthur study which noted that “the Japanese were too adaptable and inured to hardship to be affected by bombing.”26 Post war assessment done by the US Strategic Bombing Survey also concurred with the findings from the aforementioned study where it also highlighted that, despite the Japanese public confidence declining from 81% to 32% after Le May’s incendiary attacks in 1945, the “people’s morale never cracked, and faith, stoicism and apathy enabled them to endure the horrors suffered at the hands of the US Army Air Forces (USAAF).”27 Clearly, the effectiveness of hard power to force the opponent into submission had declined and history would repeat itself again in Vietnam 20 years later.

Despite multiple aerial bombardment operations against the Viet Cong, the military might of the US did not affect the morale of the Viet Cong to the extent of
forcing them into complete submission. Between 1965 and 1972, there were several key aerial bombardment operations executed by the US against the Viet Cong. These include Operation Rolling Thunder, Operation Linebacker I and Operation Linebacker II. The North Vietnamese were asymmetrically disadvantaged but yet, they were able to put up a credible resistance to nullify the effectiveness of US airpower. The futility of US hard power in Vietnam is best summed up by a conversation between Colonel (COL) Harry Summers and a North Vietnamese officer. As COL Summers commented, “the US had won all the battles,” to which the North Vietnamese replied, “that may be so, but it is also irrelevant.”

Decisive battles executed through the use of hard power no longer guarantee military outcomes that will deliver a conclusive political result.

Additionally, the Clausewitzian notion that the use of force is the best way to compel our enemy to do our will is also being challenged. The goal of the traditional decisive battle is to use an overwhelming offensive force, create a tremendous amount of physical destruction and coerce the adversary into submission. However, the terms of the 1973 Paris Peace Accord were based on the terms jointly negotiated and agreed between then US National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger and North Vietnamese Politburo member, Le Duc Tho, and not solely dictated by the US. It is also noteworthy to highlight that subsequent US attempts to include additional terms into the Paris Peace Accord were futile. In other words, despite inflicting a huge amount of physical destruction unto North Vietnam, the Vietnam War did not end solely on US terms. Wars can no longer be won through the application of pure military force. As we transit into a different paradigm of war, there needs to be a better exploitation of the strategic narrative instead of renewing blind faith on military hardware.

THE GROWING EMPHASIS ON THE STRATEGIC NARRATIVE

The world is progressing towards being an information society—one in which the production, diffusion and consumption of information dominates the cultural, economic and political spheres of life in the country. This progression is one reason why Rupert Smith in his seminal work, *The Utility of Force*, argues that there is a paradigm shift in war—a shift from an 'inter-state industrial war' to 'war amongst the people.' Simpson further crystallises Smith’s argument by using the juxtaposing analogies of a boxing match versus a street fight to distil the difference between 'inter-state industrial war' and 'war amongst the people.' By using these analogies, Simpson’s point is that, unlike in a boxing match (inter-state war) where there is an independent judge to hand out a mutually accepted verdict to the boxers, there is no neutral judge in a street fight (war amongst the people) and the audience are judges in their own right. As Simpson puts it, “War is not a single, fixed, interpretive construct because audiences can understand war in their own way.” Therefore, ‘war amongst the people’ is more about a battle of ideas through the exploitation of the strategic narrative rather than a battle of wills executed through the destructive nature of physical force.

Strategic narrative is the explanation of actions. In essence, strategic narrative attempts to explain the ‘why’ behind the ‘what’ and is designed to persuade people of something. This need for a coherent set of strategic narrative is especially emphasised in the contemporary strategic environment where the strategic audience is highly fragmented, politically
conscious, highly educated, inter-connected and has greater access to information at a much faster pace. As a result, physical actions tend to matter less to a conflict’s outcome than how those actions are being perceived. More specifically, from a military perspective, there is now an added dimension to the concept of ‘means and effects’. Any military action will create an effect but it cannot be assumed that the effect will be interpreted the same across the strategic audience. This is because amongst the strategic audience, there are many divergent actors with various objectives which may be conflicting. For example, the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war has been considered to be a war of competing narratives. The lack of consonance between strategic narratives from both sides has gone to the extent where the winner or loser cannot be easily identified. To the Hezbollah, they cited their survival and endurance against massive Israeli attacks as reasons to claim a divine victory. To the Israelis, they boasted its airpower achievements and declared the war to be Israel’s “greatest military and political victories ever.” In the Clausewitzian paradigm, war is complex, uncertain and transient. This notion cannot be more true today.

THE THREE TAKEAWAYS FOR THE SAF:
Takeaway #1: Our concept of victory must be clear

Based on the discussion above, there are three takeaways for the SAF. First, we must be clear about our concept of victory. To reiterate, decisive battles provide the operational advantage but they do not decide the outcome of war. Therefore, we must avoid equating operational military success to victory that can serve the country’s strategic interests. In the words of former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Dr. Fred Ikle, we must avoid a situation where we become blinded by our own military success to the extent where “the means become ends.” To do so, we must remain grounded in the value proposition of the military to the larger scheme of things. The military is a tool of statecraft and, in war, our objective is to
establish military conditions to facilitate a political solution. Hence, borrowing J.B. Bartholomew’s definition, our concept of victory should be described as “a positive assessment of the post-war political situation in terms of achievement and decisiveness that is acknowledged, sustainable, and resolves underlying political issues.”

On a related note, we must also be aware that victory is a matter of perception and is not “a fact or condition.” This is an important takeaway because the implication is that victory will be defined based on the effects, and not the effort. The situation is further complicated by the contemporary kaleidoscopic strategic environment. In response to this, when designing our military strategies, we need to go deeper and consider the following: (a) who are the strategic audience, (b) who are our target strategic audience and finally, (c) how the created effects will be perceived by these target strategic audience. To that end, it is important for us to exploit the strategic narrative and shape public opinion.

Takeaway #2: Our information operations capability must remain responsive, calibrated and nuanced

Second, we must ensure that our information operations capability remain responsive, targeted and nuanced. This way, we are in a better position to exploit the strategic narratives to our favour. This is not something new and the effectiveness of strategic narratives in shaping public opinion to one’s benefit has been played out many times in history. From the hailing of Sultan Suleiman as a national hero despite his failed attempt to take Vienna in 1529 to the conflicting interpretations of US intentions in its invasion of Iraq in 2003. The challenge for the strategic narrative today is “to consider how a narrative can gain purchase on audiences whose political persuasions vary widely, without coming apart.” To that end, we must strive to ensure that our strategic narratives are calibrated and consistent in order to convince. Key to this would be to constantly stay abreast with societal changes, both domestic and international.

Takeaway #3: Our Professional Military Education (PME) syllabi must continue to be academically rigorous

Finally, we need to broaden the perspectives of our military commanders to avoid parochialism and rigidity. War is an art not a science. In designing strategies, we must avoid falling into the trap of believing that there is a winning formula or a scientific model that can be applied to unravel the complexities of war. Specifically, when applying the concept of the decisive battle to achieve a swift and decisive victory, we need to be contextual, objective and apply sound judgment. On this, Clausewitz encouraged the development of a rigorous military education programme—syllabi that not only breeds inquisitive and analytical minds but also equip commanders with knowledge, especially on military history. To that end, we should review the curriculum of all our Officer PME programmes and ensure that each syllabus is designed to meet the spirit of military education—think critically, reflect objectively and analyse deeply. In other words, we must not confuse training for education.

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CONCLUSION

In conclusion, achieving a swift and decisive victory is an attainable goal but we must avoid having a simplistic understanding and application of its key
component—the decisive battle. Decisive battles do not decide the outcome of war but, when used correctly, they can provide the operational advantage to win the war. Also, given the contextual factors, decisive battles are no longer confined to the traditional battle-space and are not solely dependent on the use of hard power. In order to astutely apply the concept of decisive battles in our strategies, the SAF needs to be clear about our concept of victory, continue honing our information operations capability and ensure that our professional military education syllabi are designed to groom military professionals who can think, reflect and analyse.

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ENDNOTES


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