CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL WARFARE SINCE 1945

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ABSTRACT

Since the end of World War II, warfare has undergone significant changes in its methods and techniques. In this essay, the author aims to explore the characteristics of successful warfare since 1945 by examining historical examples of conflicts and identifying common trends. He argues that successful warfare has been marked by several key factors, including technological superiority, effective strategy and tactics, a strong logistical base, and a clear, political and social objective. The author has drawn on examples from the Cold War, the Gulf War, the War in Afghanistan and the Iraq War, among others, to support his arguments. The author concludes that ultimately, the characteristics of successful warfare have evolved over time, and that contemporary warfare requires a holistic approach that incorporates military, political, and social factors.

Keywords: Warfare; Characteristics; Successful; History; Holistic

INTRODUCTION

It has been 78 years since the end of World War II (WWII) in 1945. It is timely now to review the characteristics of successful warfare since the end of that global war. While 70 odd years may seem short in the larger span of the history of warfare, one only needs recall that 75 years prior to the end of WWII, the belligerents of the Franco-Prussian War were only just coming to grips with the implications of the needle gun and the railroad on the battlefield. The protean nature of warfare demands that those in the business of war continuously adapt to new circumstances, or be swept away by the tides of change.

German Stuka dive bombers over the Eastern Front.

DEFINITION OF SUCCESSFUL WARFARE

To determine the characteristics of successful warfare, a working definition is first necessary. War, as defined by Carl von Clausewitz, is 'merely the continuation of policy by other means.'[1] As such, successful warfare must fundamentally be defined by the successful achievement of a nation's policy goals—in other words, a nation's stated ends of warfare. However, as war is also an expensive undertaking both in terms of blood and money, successful warfare must also be defined by its relatively low cost.

Given this definition, and remaining within the 'ends, ways, and means' framework of strategy, determining the characteristics of successful warfare then becomes a question of what ways militaries employ and what means they possess that bring about success. In terms of ways, successful warfare since 1945 has been defined at the strategic level by the deft employment of hybrid warfare, and at the operational level by the mastery of multi-domain operations enabled by networking. In terms of means, states needed to secure adequate public support for the use of force as a key prerequisite for the successful conduct of war.

HYBRID WARFARE

At the strategic level, the deft employment of hybrid warfare has allowed states to successfully attain their policy goals at minimal cost. Since the end of WWII, the incidence of conventional interstate conflict has decreased. Globalisation has also made peace more profitable for states—economies have become increasingly interconnected, and with greater economic openness, this means that states no longer have to 'politically possess a territory in order to benefit from it.'[2] Nuclear deterrence and the burgeoning liberal

democratic world order have discouraged large-scale warfare.[3] Additionally, the conventional superiority of Western armed forces has deterred potential adversaries from employing conventional warfare as a tool to achieve their political ends.[4] In concert, these trends produced the 'Long Peace' in the wake of WWII, marked by a broad decline in the frequency of war.[5]

Amidst this shift in the strategic environment, states had to find other ways to compete and achieve their policy goals without resorting to conventional warfare. Concomitantly, the world has seen the rise of so-called 'grey zone conflict' as states sought to pursue their foreign policy goals without resorting to conventional military action. It is amongst these interstices within the peace-to-war continuum where conventional militaries take on a more ambiguous role, and where the employment of hybrid warfare emerges. Hybrid warfare is characterised by the 'integrated employment of conventional and unconventional ways and means—by any combination of state and non-state actors—within the same battlespace.'[6] Hybrid actions taken by states or state-sponsored factions remain below the threshold of war and escape the traditional 'Western binary conceptions of peace and war, of military and non-military means, and of conventional and irregular approaches.'[7] This confers several advantages.

First, the employment of unconventional hybrid capabilities is less likely to provoke a strong retaliatory response from the target state or the international community. While states are prepared to respond to conventional warfare on the one hand or diplomatic statecraft on the other, they struggle to formulate a coherent response to hybrid threats.[8] The concept of sovereignty becomes blurred in cases of election meddling, economic coercion, information manipulation, and the use of ambiguous forces.[9] This is especially so with hybrid actions taken in emerging domains such as cyberspace and social media. Additionally, hybrid actions are often non-attributable, and where they can be attributed, are insufficient to form a strong *casus belli* for retaliation, as they exploit 'loopholes in traditional notions of warfare' that 'limit the potential for escalation to conventional conflict and/or major power intervention'.[10]

Second, hybrid warfare provides distinct advantages to non-democratic states. There exists an 'asymmetric adherence' to international law amongst states, as non-democratic states are not as beholden to the same international legal structures as democratic ones are.[11] Additionally, highly centralised control over their informational, legal and economic apparatuses allows non-democratic states to employ them more readily and flexibly and even in legally ambiguous ways.

A US B-66 Destroyer and four F-105 Thunderchiefs dropping bombs on North Vietnam during Operation Rolling Thunder.

Third, hybrid warfare allows smaller states to compete with vastly larger and stronger adversaries by avoiding the conventional military superiority of the larger state or by forcing the larger state to split its attention to address the myriad hybrid threats. This may often be difficult, as functions are often compartmentalised into different bureaucratic agencies, resulting in an incoherent response to an integrated hybrid threat. Taken together, these three advantages give states, especially small and non-democratic ones, a relatively less risky method through which they can pursue their policy goals amidst an environment that restricts the use of conventional warfare.

Case Studies – Vietnam War & the Annexation of Crimea

Two case studies illustrate the successful employment of hybrid warfare—that of the Vietnam War and Russia's annexation of Crimea. During the Vietnam War, North Vietnam aimed to defeat United States (US) forces in Vietnam and eventually unify the country. Understanding that US forces possessed a decisive conventional edge, North Vietnam employed both conventional warfare and insurgency simultaneously in a hybrid strategy. This required US forces to fight a conventional war against the North Vietnamese main forces, while at the same time conduct pacification operations to quell the insurgency. US forces lacked the necessary resources to fight on both fronts, however, forcing commanders to prioritise efforts on their most immediate problem. While General Westmoreland implemented pacification efforts as early as 1965 in the form of Combined Action Platoons incorporating both US Marines and South Vietnamese forces, these efforts were ultimately compromised by large North Vietnamese units moving into the area, diverting the Marines' attention away from pacification.[12]

In 2014, Russia employed hybrid tactics during its annexation of Crimea. Aiming to destabilise Ukraine, derail its plans for inclusion into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and seize Crimea, Russia first used economic and cyber warfare in conjunction with sponsorship of non-state actors to foment rebellion in Ukraine.[13] In the ensuing unrest, Russian troops marched into Crimea in unmarked uniforms, seizing key government and military sites.[14] This was closely integrated with the spread of misinformation—Russia spent over $19 million on a 600-strong Internet 'troll army' to support the pro-Russian narrative.[15] This combination of unconventional forces and misinformation was backed by a 'considerable military and nuclear force,' rendering Ukraine and the West unable to mount a conventional response despite the fact that Russian denials of involvement were wholly implausible.[16] As a result, Russia was able to achieve its objectives in an almost bloodless manner, with only one casualty taken on the Russian side.[17] These examples illustrate the potential of hybrid warfare as a tool for states to pursue strategic goals in situations in which conventional warfare would be inappropriate.

Hybrid warfare is characterised by the 'integrated employment of conventional and unconventional ways and means—by any combination of state and non-state actors—within the same battlespace.

DEALING WITH HYBRID THREATS

Looking to the future, potential adversaries will likely continue developing and employing hybrid capabilities to compete below the threshold of war. Robust responses to hybrid threats are essential in a time when grey zone conflict is increasingly the norm. As with conventional warfare, states must exercise constant vigilance even in non-traditional domains. Here, better information sharing and intelligence fusion capabilities are keys to providing early warning of an imminent hybrid attack.[18] Once a hybrid attack is underway, information warfare capabilities are essential to counteract the malicious effects of enemy misinformation operations. Strategic communications must respond in a 'coherent, consistent, fast, and precise' manner in order to match the rapid pace of misinformation, though this is often difficult for large bureaucracies such as governments or their militaries.[19]

Resilience is also critical in resisting the effects of hybrid warfare, and makes it more difficult for hybrid attackers to realise their intended goals. States should pay particular attention to marginalised social groups, who may be particularly vulnerable to radicalisation.[20] Finally, Western states should also develop their own hybrid capabilities to provide calibrated options below the threshold of war. Here, special operations forces are key, given their unique non-conventional capabilities.[21] In conjunction, these measures will enable the West to better confront hybrid threats on the increasingly 'grey' battlefield.

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Multi-Domain Operations (MDO)

On the operational level, the integrated employment of capabilities across multiple domains, otherwise known as Multi-Domain Operations (MDO), gives militaries an edge on the battlefield. Integrated MDO present multiple dilemmas to the enemy and confer 'physical and psychological advantages and influence and control over the operational environment' to the multi-domain force.[22] It is the 'artful combination of these multiple dilemmas, rather than a clear overmatch in terms of any particular capability, that produces the desired advantage.'[23] Capabilities in each domain provide unique advantages, but also have their own vulnerabilities that can be exploited if operating alone. Ground forces manoeuvre to seize and retain terrain, but are limited in their speed and range. Naval forces provide massive lift capacity and strategic reach, but can only influence areas situated near coastlines. Air forces can reach deep behind enemy lines to deliver precision firepower, but are limited by weapon payload capacities and face difficulties operating in an Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) environment. Space assets are not limited by traditional sovereign boundaries, but

possess limited kinetic capabilities. It is, therefore, the integrated employment of these capabilities that allows each domain to complement and reinforce effects of other domains, thereby giving the multi-domain force the qualitative edge.

While the concept of MDO is relatively new, having only emerged in US Army doctrine in December 2018 in the form of a Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) publication entitled *The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028*, the concept of combining capabilities from across domains—that of 'combined arms'—is far from new.[24] During WWI, belligerents began grasping the implications of the three-dimensional battlespace with the appearance of long-range indirect fire artillery and aircraft on the battlefield. WWII saw both Axis and Allied powers embracing combined arms in their warfighting doctrines. During the Cold War, the US Army developed the AirLand Battle doctrine in 1982 in response to the Soviet and Warsaw Pact countries' numerical superiority in, and improving quality of, equipment as demonstrated in the Yom Kippur War.[25] More recently, US Army doctrine describes combined arms as 'the synchronised and simultaneous application of arms to achieve an effect greater than if each element was used separately or sequentially,' and lists it as one of the six tenets of Unified Land Operations.[26] Despite the concept's many incarnations across the past century, however, one thing has remained constant—the recognition by militaries that successful modern warfare will require the integration of capabilities across multiple domains.

Advantages of MDO

The advantages yielded by MDO have been demonstrated clearly in several conflicts since 1945. The Six-Day War of 1967 is most often noted for the decisive role that airpower played in Israel's massive opening strike on the Egyptian Air Force and subsequent destruction of the Syrian and Jordanian Air Forces, giving ground forces freedom of manoeuvre without fear of air attack. Airpower's role in the war was not simply limited to the opening blow, however. It continued to exert a material influence on the battlefield throughout the war, closely complementing the ground campaign, without which 'Israeli casualties would undoubtedly have been higher and it would have

taken Israel longer to secure its conquests.'[27] Early in the war, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) interdicted Jordan's 2nd Armoured Regiment moving to reinforce Jerusalem. Though only a few tanks or Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) were destroyed, the unit was 'so thoroughly demoralised that it retreated… rather than press on and risk further airstrikes,' thereby facilitating the capture of Jerusalem by ground forces.[28] The IAF also effectively isolated the battlefield in the Sinai against the Egyptians and in the Golan Heights against the Syrians. Additionally, the IAF's initial massive air strikes shocked and paralysed the Arab high commands, which significantly affected the Arab armies' ability to respond to Israeli attacks due to their 'extremely rigid and centralised command and control systems.'[29] While, ultimately, Israeli ground forces would still have won, given their better tactical performance, the complementary role that airpower played in supporting ground operations clearly contributed to Israel's victory by reducing Israeli casualties and by dramatically shortening the campaign.[30] 15 years later, the British effectively executed MDO during the Falklands War, with complementary capabilities creating cross-domain 'multiplier effects.'[31] The sinking of the Argentinian cruiser *Belgrano* by a British nuclear submarine allowed Royal Navy ships greater freedom of navigation in theatre, hence enabling them to better detect Argentinian aircraft launched from the mainland and provide early warning for the British Task Force.[32] Later, an amphibious raid on the Pebble Island airfield by British special operations forces, with naval gunfire support, destroyed 11 aircraft and 'forced Argentina to withdraw most of its high-performance aircraft 400 miles back to the mainland.'[33] This reduced the effectiveness of the Argentinian air force, allowing ground forces greater freedom of manoeuvre.

While the development of MDO doctrine remains a key focus of modern militaries worldwide, it is by any measure an expensive undertaking. Continued investments into military technology, especially networking, are crucial to maintain the edge in MDO. Technology alone is insufficient, however. There also needs to be increased emphasis on joint training, in order to ensure interoperability between Services. Yet, even as states modernise their militaries for MDO, one conundrum remains—MDO in the future will be fundamentally different from before, with nascent capabilities in the cyberspace, information and electronic warfare domains only just taking to the field. As such, the process of joint experimentation—for example, through the use of structured seminars, simulations, and field events—is necessary to explore 'ideas, assumptions, and crucial elements' of nascent MDO capabilities, so as to ensure that the militaries that states build today will provide the right solutions for the future battlefield.[34]

THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC SUPPORT

Besides developing suitable ways to prosecute successful warfare, states must also possess adequate means which give them the latitude necessary for the use of force. Here, the ability of a nation's political leadership to secure public support is essential. The Clausewitzian Trinity elucidates just how important this is, with 'passion' as one of its apexes, representing the society's capacity for primordial violence, hatred and enmity.[35] Should this give way instead to apprehension and disdain for the use of force, the government will then be constrained in its ability to use force to achieve its policy goals. This is particularly so for liberal democracies, where the ballot box acts as a check on political leaders' use of force. Here, just war theory is particularly useful in ensuring states have a legitimate cause to go to war *(jus ad bellum)*, conduct war in a just and proportionate manner *(jus in bello)*, and conclude war in an ethical manner *(just post bellum)*, as a basis for securing public support for the use of force.

States must therefore ensure that even in the 'Long Peace' that the world enjoys today, they continue to maintain constant vigilance, eschew complacency, and make consistent investments in defence to ensure that they remain ready for the next war.

The Vietnam War

Two conflicts in the last 75 years stand out as cautionary tales for states unable to secure and

maintain public support for war—the Vietnam War and Operation Restore Hope in Somalia. During the Vietnam War, the high number of US casualties and slow progress of the war frustrated the public, causing a 'deepening domestic crisis' that eventually forced President Lyndon Johnson to 'begin down the long road toward ultimate disengagement.'[36] This situation was exacerbated by the positive overtures made to the public in media engagements by military and political leaders in late 1967, with General Westmoreland opining that American troops had made 'real progress,' and that withdrawals could begin in 'two years or less.'[37] This created an air of optimism and hope, only to be crushed by the surprise Tet Offensive shortly thereafter. While US casualties were substantially lower than those suffered by the Communist forces, the contradiction between the large-scale North Vietnamese offensive and the optimistic messages put out just a few months earlier shook the American public's confidence. Consequently, President Johnson's approval ratings suffered, and President Richard Nixon was eventually voted into office with the promise to 'end the war and win the peace in the Pacific.'[38]

Operation Restore Hope in Somalia

Less than two decades later, presidential policy on the use of force during Operation Restore Hope in Somalia was constrained by the degree of public and media scrutiny.[39] In particular, a study by Matthew Baum found that both the Bush and Clinton administrations restricted the use of force during times of heightened public and media scrutiny and escalated the use of force when the public was paying less attention.[40] Bush made it a point to set 'substantial conditions' when offering to deploy US troops into Somalia, insisting on 'explicit endorsement by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), involvement by other UN member states… and an early handover of responsibility for the mission to a multinational peacekeeping force.'[41] By doing so, he sought to 'diffuse responsibility' so as to maximise support for the operation and minimise political fallout had the mission failed.[42] The relationship between public support and employment of force was even more stark during the Clinton administration, especially in the wake of the disastrous October raid in Mogadishu, which led to the downing of two Black Hawk helicopters and the subsequent two days of bitter street fighting that the severely outnumbered US Army Rangers had to endure. The already flagging public support for the operation collapsed further. A CBS survey conducted shortly thereafter indicated only 21 percent support for Clinton's handling of the conflict.[43] On 7th October, 1993, less than a week after the Battle of Mogadishu, Clinton announced that US troops would be withdrawn from Somalia by 31st March, 1994.[44] Both the Vietnam War and Operation Restore Hope illustrate that a state's policy space is in fact constrained by public support, as political leaders seek to maximise political gain from the employment of force, and avoid the potential fallout should an operation go wrong.

Sailors and Marines load crates of cargo into a CH-46 'Sea Knight' helicopter at the airport. The units are part of Joint Task Force Somalia.

It is evident from these examples that public support is critical to the employment of force. Yet, in today's increasingly interconnected world, shoring up public support for war may be more difficult than ever, as ubiquitous media sources pipe images from the frontlines into living rooms on a near real-time basis, providing the average citizen a front-row seat to the horrors of war. Additionally, given the increasing technological edge that Western militaries have over their adversaries, there would be less patience for protracted wars and lower tolerance for casualties, as societies expect rapid and decisive victories. The experience of Vietnam and Somalia yield several lessons for states. First, liberal democracies cannot ignore the importance of public support if they are to embark on the use of force to pursue policy goals. Here, building resilience in peace is necessary to inoculate the public against the potential ramifications of a protracted war and high casualties. Second, states must only employ force in pursuit of a perceived just cause, as a basis for the people's acceptance of the inevitable costs of war. Third, given the aversion of societies to high casualties, robust force protection measures to minimise casualties are necessary to prevent an erosion of public support.[45]

CONCLUSION

The author highlights that as the case studies in this essay have shown, the characteristics of successful warfare have indeed shifted in the past 78 years. The conventional superiority of the West has led to the rise of hybrid warfare as a method for states to pursue their political goals without substantial risk of significant retaliation. Continued developments in military technologies and the emergence of new domains on the battlefield necessitate the mastery of multi-domain operations, reaping 'multiplier effects' from each complementary capability that together yield decisive advantages. As nations struggle to maintain their edge in warfighting, public support remains a fundamental necessity for the employment of force, especially in liberal democracies. While states continue to hone their conventional warfighting capabilities amidst the emerging trend of Great Power competition today, the example of Ukraine in 2014 stands out as a stark reminder—warfare, despite our efforts to understand it, is decidedly protean in nature, and that despite our best efforts to forecast the future, the next war may never be what we expect it to be. States must therefore ensure that even in the 'Long Peace' that the world enjoys today, they continue to maintain constant vigilance, eschew complacency, and make consistent investments in defence to ensure that they remain ready for the next war.

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