

100 days of Russia-Ukraine conflict: Redefining the nature of limited wars

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People survey the destruction amid the smoldering remains of a shopping center in Kyiv, Ukraine. (Photo: AP)

President Vladimir Putin shocked the global polity when, on February 24, 2022, Russian forces launched a full-fledged offensive against Ukraine, terming it as 'Special Military Operation'. Given the overwhelming superiority of the Russian military, it was anticipated that the war will be over in a matter of days, with Ukraine army suffering ignominious defeat. However, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has proved the strategic pundits wrong by denying Putin a quick victory and engaging in prolonged war. The way this conflict has panned out defies many traditional assumptions, indicates emerging trends which will shape the contours of future warfare as also sets a rethink to redefine the nature of 'limited conventional wars'.

Anatomy of limited wars

Historically, wars have been fought to achieve political objectives, employing power to force the opponent to yield. As per Carl Von Clausewitz, "Each age had its own peculiar form of war".

In the 20th century, there was general frustration with long-drawn wars. Post-World War II, 'limited war' was seen as an alternate to global war. The Cold War phase witnessed a number of limited wars in Asia. Such conflicts were characterised by precise politico-military objectives, confined in terms of time and space, and high in intensity prosecuted with lethal conventional weapon systems. During the Cold War period, the Korean war was the first limited war fought over three years (1950-53), followed by the Vietnam war, which lasted for almost a decade. Rest of the wars, be in West Asia or the Indian subcontinent, were of short duration -- not more than a few weeks. Despite being limited in scope, these wars ended with decisive outcomes. Korean war saw the emergence of China as a major military power.

Vietnam war ended in a Communist victory, with Americans suffering humiliating defeat. Arab-Israeli conflict witnessed a number of limited wars, with far-reaching geopolitical consequences. Even the 1971 Bangladesh War, barely of fortnight duration, changed the architecture of South Asia, with India gaining recognition as a regional power.

Post-Cold War, as 'balance of interest' trumped 'balance of power' dynamics, limited wars alongside sub-conventional conflicts gained prominence. The Gulf wars were limited in scope but hybrid in character. As per David Halberstam, the current conflicts are carefully calibrated, "wars in time of peace". The spectrum of conflict is characterised by 'high-low' mix' i.e. 'trade up-trade down'.

The success in conventional operations is perceived to be largely contingent on firepower, mobility and force projection. US Marine Doctrine enunciates 'three block war'; wherein troops may be simultaneously engaged in conventional fighting, peacekeeping and humanitarian relief operations, in a single theatre.

In the age of information warfare marked by network centrality, the battlefields have become non-linear, multi-dimensional and integrated; precision weapon systems and 'effect-based operations' being the norm. Given the complexity of the battlefield environment, defining lines between strategic, operational and tactical domains stand blurred.

Ukraine war: Salient facets

The politico-military aim of the Russian invasion was to achieve the security of its western borders. It encompassed Ukraine's neutrality (refrain from joining NATO), demilitarisation and de-nazification of the State, tantamounting to regime change. The objective also included freeing the people of eastern Ukraine regions to include Donbas, Luhansk and Donetsk. In operational terms, it involved overrunning complete Ukraine and seizing major cities of Kyiv, Kharkiv and Mariupol.

With absolute superiority in mechanised forces and complete air domination, Russia launched a multi-pronged offensive in the form of blitzkrieg. Main thrusts were from north and east, with a focus on Kyiv; subsidiary from south, Mariupol being the key objective. The initial advance was swift on a wide front, covering vast swathe of territory over hundreds of kilometres. As Russian forces practically faced no opposition, it appeared that the Ukrainian army had capitulated.

However, Ukraine's strategy was to fight from fortified built-up areas. Using towns and villages as bases, small teams armed with man portable anti-tank weapons like the Javelin missile (US-NATO origin), exploiting the terrain and adversary's poor tactics proved devastating. Alongside the armed drones, Bayraktar TB-2 (Turkish) and compact Switchblade (US) proved extremely lethal. Even the shoulder fired 'Surface to Air Missile' Stingers (US origin) took a heavy toll of Russian helicopters and low-flying fighter jets providing close air support.

Due to stiff resistance offered by the Ukraine Armed Forces, it was soon apparent that the Russian offensive had got stalled, with large armour columns lined up along the roads. The Russians took heavy losses for violating the basic concepts of combined arms operations and neglecting to shape the battlefield. The tanks operating without the infantry, air defence cover and close artillery support were extremely vulnerable to the Ukraine small teams.

Even the Russian 'Air Borne Forces' suffered heavy losses for not securing the air space in the area of operations. Crippling losses coupled with high casualties running into five figures, including senior commanders, seriously dented the morale of the Russian army.

Even the logistics became a major constraint as the Russian forces were widely spread, concentrated around major cities like Kyiv and Kharkiv over a prolonged period, without secure axes of maintenance. The early spring thaw resulting in 'Rasputitsa' severely constrained the Russian operations, as also adding to the logistics woes. Due to the lack of progress, the Russians were forced to pull back from Kyiv and focus on operations in the eastern Ukraine region.

Redefining nature of limited war

Russia-Ukraine war is the largest armed conflict in Europe post-World War II. First classic limited war in the 21st century, it has many trappings which tend to redefine the very nature of 'limited wars'. Salient facets which merit consideration are enumerated below:-

- Use of force as an instrument to achieve political objectives still remains a preferred option, especially where there is an asymmetry in the power equation between the belligerents. While gauging the probability of adversary resorting to use force, it is prudent to base assessment on capability rather than intent. Case in point: strategic community grossly misreading Putin's mind while well aware of Russian military power.

- Assumption that limited war follows a pattern of escalatory ladder merits rethink, going by Russian forces changing track overnight from training grounds to the battlefield. Doctrinal framework of 'limited wars' envisages specific objectives and 'calibrated application' of force in a restricted geographic space. However, the Russian offensive was in the form of full-scale war across the entire spectrum, with overarching objectives as brought above. It was after a month into the war, Putin was forced to revise the war aim confining to "liberation of Donbas".
- With the Ukraine war already into the fourth month, the notion of truncated timelines as essential characteristic of limited is in for review, calling for nations to build capacities to fight prolonged campaigns. To this end, it is indeed pertinent to visualise the end state, which has to be realistic. Overpowered by the delusion of total victory, Putin is unrelenting to cease operations.
- Proactive strategy and superior weapon system may provide an advantage in the initial stage of operation but do not guarantee success. Coordinated combined arms operations employing 'Battle Management Systems' is an imperative to network multi-weapon platforms. Russian forces were outperformed by the Ukrainian army, due to latter's better man-machine combination; a crucial battle winning factor.
- Sheer intensity of fighting in high-tech environment demands agile logistics echelons. For prolonged campaign, the logistics support needs to be resilient, flexible and sustainable, to keep pace with the operations.
- While the nuclear weapons are seen as the instrument of deterrence, Putin chose to brandish these, not ruling out their use in case Russia faced an existential threat. An autocrat leader can't afford to lose and can go to any extent to ensure victory ought to be factored.
- Sub-conventional warfare involving militias and irregulars in eastern Ukraine alongside the conventional war lends hybrid character to the conflict and is set to be a new normal.
- Superpowers and allies play a predominant role in influencing the conduct and outcome of limited wars. However, it has acquired new dimensions in the form of provisioning real time intelligence, orchestrating information warfare, sustained supply of weapon systems and imparting training. The limitation of global bodies like the UN to play an effective role stands vindicated once again.
- No matter what the outcome of this conflict may be, the geopolitical architecture of Europe is set for a makeover with wider global implications.

In retrospect

Russian invasion of Ukraine is a tectonic event, with far-reaching consequences. Given the failure of its military to achieve the intended objectives, Russia's stature as a global player is bound to diminish. This will imply rebalancing of the global order, which in turn will lead to reconfiguring of the existing bilateral as also multilateral structures, covering both security and economic spectrums.

While the impact of Ukraine conflict on the fundamentals of the 'limited conventional war' may not be very significant, but there are many dimensions which will come under intense evaluation. At the strategic level, formulation of politico-military objectives, time and space matrix, integrated employment of tri service war-waging potential, including employment of air power and logistics, will merit closer scrutiny.

Given the devastating losses of Russian ground forces will draw in depth review of all arms structures, especially the mechanised forces battle groups, small teams' operations, role of new emerging technologies-based platforms -- UAVs, armed drone and network-centric enablers for better C4ISR (Command, Control, Communication, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance).

From the Indian perspective, the key areas of introspection will be the performance of Russian equipment, particularly the ability of its fighter aircraft to suppress the Ukraine air defence systems, besides employment armour against the anti-tank systems and armed drones. Self-reliance in terms of weapon systems and state-of-the-art technologies, besides diversification of sources of procurements, will demand a holistic review. Need for armed force to be adept in the combined arms warfare in the integrated battlefield environment and maintenance of highest standards professionalism stands amply underscored.

The Ukraine war is still in progress, with no immediate end in sight. It will continue to be the subject of in-depth study as it defines the trend lines of 21st century warfare.

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