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THE TRANSFORMATION OF WARFARE: EVOLUTION OF HARD POWER & MULTI-DOMAIN OPERATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT

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Abstract

Contemporary warfare has transcended traditional domain boundaries, creating a security environment where the conventional distinction between war and peace has become operationally meaningless. This article examines the transformation of modern conflict through the lens of multi-domain operations (MDO), analysing how states—particularly major powers like China, Russia, and the United States—are reshaping military doctrine to integrate kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities across land, sea, air, space, cyber, and information domains. Drawing on recent conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, and Nagorno- Karabakh, this analysis demonstrates that while hard power remains foundational to strategic success, its expression has evolved dramatically toward standoff capabilities, precision strikes, and information-centric operations.

Introduction

The contemporary security environment has witnessed a fundamental paradigm shift that challenges traditional concepts of war and peace. The
U.S. Army's December 2018 publication "The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations

2028” outlined the importance of maintaining superiority across all operational domains, reflecting a broader recognition that modern warfare occurs simultaneously across land, sea, air, space, cyber, and information domains. This transformation affects not merely tactical operations but the very conceptual foundations of warfare, peace, and military victory.

For nations like India, facing persistent two-front threats and aspirations for regional leadership by 2047, understanding this evolution is critical. Recent military operations, including Operation Sindoor in May 2025, have demonstrated both the potential and limitations of contemporary military doctrine when confronting adversaries capable of sophisticated narrative warfare and multi-domain competition.

Redefining Peace: The Obsolescence of Traditional Concepts

During the Persian Gulf War, precision-guided munitions accounted for only 9% of weapons fired but achieved 75% of all successful hits, proving 35 times more effective per weapon than unguided systems. This technological revolution has fundamentally altered how states prosecute conflicts, but more significantly, it has transformed the nature of peacetime itself.

The traditional binary distinction between war and peace has become operationally insignificant. A more accurate definition of contemporary “peace” is the absence of maneuvering in the kinetic domain, acknowledging that conflict continues across non-kinetic domains with varying intensity levels. Russian cyberattacks on Ukraine surged 70% in 2024, reaching 4,315 incidents compared to 2,541 in 2023, with hackers targeting critical infrastructure including energy sectors, government institutions, and telecommunications.

These operations exemplify continuous non-kinetic warfare that persists during diplomatic negotiations, ceasefires, and periods of reduced kinetic activity. China’s “Three Warfare” doctrine, officially adopted by the People’s Liberation Army in 2003, employs media or public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare to achieve strategic objectives without kinetic engagement. This approach operates continuously, gradually shifting regional balances without triggering conventional military responses

—a strategy analysts term as “salami slicing.

The Enduring Relevance of Hard Power

Despite technological evolution, classical strategic theory maintains relevance. The Clausewitzian “wondrous trinity” of violence, chance, and rational calculation continues to define modern conflict, though expressed through new domains and capabilities. Ukraine’s experience demonstrates this principle clearly. Despite unprecedented international support through information operations, economic sanctions, and diplomatic isolation of Russia, Ukrainian resistance ultimately

depends on the capacity to deliver kinetic effects against Russian forces.
The 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict demonstrated how unmanned aerial vehicles could destroy heavy ground units including T-72 tanks and advanced S-300 air defenses, with Azerbaijan deploying Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones and Israeli loitering munitions to achieve decisive tactical superiority. However, these standoff capabilities required subsequent ground force operations to consolidate territorial gains, illustrating that precision warfare cannot entirely replace traditional military capabilities.
The 12-day Iran-Israel confrontation further demonstrated the potent use of airpower, with Israeli aircraft carrying out most missions against Iranian targets. Even the United States chose manned aircraft to attack Iranian nuclear facilities, underscoring that hard power accretion remains essential across all services, particularly when operating in multi-domain contexts involving contested terrain.

Continuous Warfare in Non-Kinetic Domains

The emergence of persistent, low-level conflict across cyber, information, and economic domains creates new strategic realities requiring sustained operational responses. Unlike kinetic warfare's episodic nature, non-kinetic operations continue without traditional battlefield boundaries or temporal limitations. Ukrainian telecommunications infrastructure faced continuous Russian cyberattacks, with the December 2023 Kyivstar hack affecting millions of users representing one incident in an ongoing campaign. Chinese "Volt Typhoon" operations demonstrate pre-positioning for future aggression, placing malware in critical infrastructure systems during peacetime. These operations continue regardless of diplomatic negotiations or military de- escalation, creating persistent vulnerabilities requiring constant defensive measures.
For democracies like India, continuous non-kinetic warfare presents particular challenges given governance constraints and open society vulnerabilities. Chinese and Pakistani information operations target domestic social divisions, economic inequalities, and regional separatism continuously rather than only during crisis periods. These demands upgrading capabilities from defensive agencies to offensive commands, particularly in cyber and space domains, while developing comprehensive national approaches that extend beyond military structures.

Multi-Domain Operations as Doctrine

Multi-domain operations represent the combined arms employment of joint and Army capabilities to create and exploit relative advantages that achieve objectives, defeat enemy forces, and consolidate gains. The transformation from traditional single-domain operations to integrated multi-domain warfare represents the most significant doctrinal evolution since the development of combined arms tactics.
The Russia-Ukraine conflict exemplifies multi-domain integration through commercial space constellation utilization, cyber-kinetic coordination, and electronic warfare

integration down to company level. Russia's Viasat satellite hack coinciding with ground invasion demonstrated attempted cyber-kinetic synchronization, while Ukraine's "IT Army" of over 400,000 volunteers highlighted how information operations can mobilize civilian populations for military objectives.

More than simply a new name for joint operations, MDO seeks to collapse an adversary's system by destroying inter-dependencies between domains through developing, transferring, and analyzing data to synchronize maneuver. The approach emphasizes systems-based targeting rather than platform-centric destruction, seeking to create "multiple dilemmas" that overwhelm adversary decision-making capacity.

Characteristics of New Age Warfare

Contemporary warfare exhibits four defining characteristics: seamless multi- domain integration, compressed decision cycles, unprecedented precision capabilities, and selective but devastating destructive effects. These characteristics combine to create qualitatively different operational environments requiring new conceptual frameworks and organizational adaptations.

Modern precision-guided munitions integrate GPS, inertial navigation, laser guidance, infrared sensors, radar, and AI simultaneously for unprecedented accuracy. However, analysis reveals that many civilian deaths stem not from inaccurate weapons but from weak intelligence, highlighting how precision technology cannot eliminate targeting errors or strategic miscalculations.

Azerbaijan's use of Turkish TB2 drones in Nagorno-Karabakh enabled strikes against targets up to 8 kilometers away, while Israeli-made suicide drones provided cost-effective capabilities that traditional air forces could not match. These systems demonstrated how affordable, accessible drones could be employed to lethal effect, potentially presaging how future wars will be fought on larger scales.

High-tempo operations reflect technological acceleration in sensing, decision-making, and engagement capabilities. Electronic warfare now requires "decision-making at machine speed while preserving human judgment in critical areas." This acceleration compresses traditional military decision cycles from hours or days to minutes or seconds, challenging hierarchical command structures and demanding decentralized authority.

Redefinition of Victory

Modern warfare has fundamentally altered victory concepts, creating conditions where military outcomes become divorced from political success and multiple parties can credibly claim victory from the same conflict.

Hamas's strategy illustrates this transformation: despite suffering massive military losses and territorial destruction, the organization pursues "mere survival as victory" in a multi-decade campaign, viewing current operations as one round in a longer

struggle.
Ukrainian objectives center on territorial integrity restoration and deterring future Russian aggression, requiring both military success and lasting political settlement. Even successful battlefield outcomes may prove insufficient without addressing underlying security guarantees and deterrence credibility. Azerbaijan's drone videos created an impression of overwhelming aerial assault that shaped international perceptions despite limited strategic impact, demonstrating how technological superiority creates compelling victory narratives regardless of strategic outcomes.
Operation Sindoor provides valuable lessons on this transformation. While India achieved decisive military effects through precision strikes conducted on May 7, 2025—timed to ensure satellite verification—Pakistan led the narrative war pedaling utter lies through its unified structure under DG ISPR. Its effect was even stated by India's Chief of Defence Staff who acknowledged that about15% of mental effort was expended countering Pakistan's false narrative, highlighting the gap between military capabilities and strategic communication.

Narrative Planning as Military Capability

The centrality of information warfare in contemporary conflict demands treating narrative development as a core military capability requiring systematic planning, resource allocation, and operational integration.
China's Three Warfare's doctrine institutionalizes narrative planning through systematic integration of public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare, with operations continuing during peacetime to shape international opinion.
Russian information operations demonstrate sophisticated narrative planning integrated with military strategy, succeeding through identifying target audience vulnerabilities such as economic grievances in Global South countries and historical anti-Western sentiment. Ukrainian operations show how weaker powers can compete effectively through authentic narratives: President Zelenskyy's communication skills and genuine civilian resistance provided credible content for international consumption, sustaining Western support despite uncertain battlefield outcomes.
Current Indian information operations capabilities remain largely defensive and reactive, focused on countering rather than proactively shaping narratives. While the Ministry of External Affairs has developed sophisticated diplomatic communication, it lacks an integrated approach connecting diplomatic, military, and economic messaging. An institutional mechanism comparable to Pakistan's DG ISPR structure is essential, moving beyond ad hoc measures to systematic capability development.

Implications for Strategic Doctrine

The transformation of warfare demands fundamental revision of strategic doctrine to address contemporary threats while leveraging indigenous advantages. The U.S.

Army's updated Field Manual 3-0 defines multi- domain operations with deeper understanding of the operational environment through three dimensions—physical, information, and human
—and five physical domains: air, ground, space, cyberspace, and maritime.
For nations facing multi-front threats, doctrines must prioritize systems disruption over territorial control while maintaining capability for sustained
operations. The current emphasis on large combined-arms formations capturing territory for post-war bargaining becomes inadequate when adversaries can achieve strategic objectives through non-kinetic means below conventional war thresholds.
Future doctrine should emphasize creating "multiple dilemmas" across domains that overwhelm adversary decision-making while preserving capabilities for extended campaigns. This requires comprehensive capability development across all domains with emphasis on indigenous technology and strategic autonomy, doctrinal evolution that preserves strategic culture advantages while adapting to contemporary operational realities, and organizational transformation enabling rapid decision-making and inter- service coordination.
Regional power aspirations demand capabilities and doctrines enabling security provision while maintaining strategic autonomy. Partnership arrangements with allied nations must enhance rather than constrain strategic flexibility, ensuring independent operational capacity while contributing meaningfully to collective security arrangements.

Critical Capability Requirements

Based on contemporary conflict analysis, military modernization must prioritize several critical capability areas:
Multi-domain command and control systems represent foundational requirements, enabling real-time integration across all domains. Indigenous development should emphasize AI-enabled decision support, automated threat detection, and rapid re-targeting capabilities.

Precision strike capabilities must expand beyond current strengths to include comprehensive standoff weapons across all domains—air-launched cruise missiles, hypersonic missiles, long-range precision artillery, autonomous loitering munitions, and Cyber weapons capable of precision targeting.

Cyber warfare capabilities demand both defensive resilience protecting critical infrastructure and offensive capacity enabling graduated responses. Current defensive Cyber agencies require up-gradation to unified commands with offensive mandates.

Space-based capabilities should emphasize both utilization and protection of space assets through indigenous satellite constellations and counter-space capabilities.

Current revisit times must be reduced from hours to under 15 minutes to meet operational requirements for monitoring dynamic situations.

Information warfare capabilities must transition from reactive defense to proactive narrative shaping through authentic content creation, multi-platform distribution, real-time response systems, and integration with diplomatic and military operations. This singular capability can transform notions of winning irrespective of military outcomes. Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance modernization must achieve real-time targeting capabilities across multiple domains simultaneously through commercial satellite imagery integration, signals intelligence capabilities, and AI-enabled analysis.

Conclusion

The comprehensive transformation of warfare across conceptual, operational, and technological dimensions creates new strategic realities demanding urgent adaptation. Modern conflict transcends traditional domain boundaries, temporal limitations, and success metrics, operating continuously across multiple domains with unprecedented precision and speed while challenging conventional concepts of victory and peace.

The critical concepts examined—from redefining peace to narrative warfare —collectively indicate that future military effectiveness depends more on integration, adaptation, and information dominance than traditional firepower and territorial control. Successful organizations will master technological integration while maintaining human judgment, achieve multi- domain coordination while preserving service excellence, and adapt to continuous competition while avoiding strategic exhaustion.

For nations aspiring to regional and global leadership, this transformation requires substantial investment in technological capabilities, institutional reforms, and human capital development. Success depends on treating these transformations as integrated systems rather than individual modernization programs, ensuring that military capability development reflects both technological sophistication and strategic wisdom.

In an era where narrative competition may prove as decisive as kinetic capabilities, the ability to integrate hard power modernization with information advantages will determine capacity to shape evolving international order rather than merely respond to external pressures. The path forward requires sustained commitment to indigenous capability development, strategic culture preservation, and operational excellence— qualities essential for contemporary security challenges in an environment where the traditional concept of peace has become obsolete, demanding 24/7 preparedness and proactive protection of national interest.

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