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The Quest for Victory in 21st Century Warfare



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"You know how to win Hannibal. But you don't know how to use victory".¹

—Maharbal

Introduction

Securing victory on the battlefield, is a gigantic task—it not only involves myriad aspects of operational planning, force application and logistics issues, but also entails numerous intangibles—from courage and fortitude to skill at arms and use of technology and ruses, to say the least; and even then, the 'whims and fancies of Lady Luck' holds the final judgement.

However, victory in battles is not always followed by accomplishment of war aims—one of the major political aims, after vanquishing foes on the battlefield, is of securing peace that is to usher in peace and prosperity. Therefore, securing victory in battle while peace remains elusive may at

Key Points

- Securing of victory on the battlefield by the armed forces and winning a war by itself is a difficult task, especially due to the arrival and expansion of multiple military domains.
- Using that battlefield victory for achieving political outcomes and peace is increasingly becoming more difficult because of 'blurring and merging' of military and non-military domains.
- It is therefore imperative to not only achieve victory on the battlefields, but also to understand the nuances of victory in different domains with different resources, especially in a nuclear backdrop in the sub-continent.
- Securing victory and then handling it with 'perspicacity' for political outcomes and securing long lasting peace is imperative and requires a paradigm shift in reshaping the classical concept of victory to a more nuanced approach.
- This article therefore dwells upon these important facets before concluding with the essential ingredients of the edifice of victory for India in the 21st century.



best be a pyrrhic victory sans any tangible benefits. Ergo, consequent to the failure of diplomacy to resolve a clash of interests, victory on the battlefield is neither the 'waypoint' nor the 'endpoint', but rather the 'start point' of the edifice of politics and national strategy.

In this article, the origin, definitions and various 'nuances of victory' shall be briefly covered. Thereafter, the article shall dwell upon the levels of victory and the dilemmas for securing victory in the 21st century, before concluding with the recommended edifice of victory.

Politics, War and Peace

War is not merely 'an act of policy' but rather, a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse carried on with other means.² Therefore, war is intertwined with political aims. Hence, achievement of political aims should be the yardstick for measuring victory in war.

Military history is replete with many instances wherein military victory on the battlefield, did not result in any achievement of political aims and a durable peace. Thus, even though victorious, a nation may fall short of achieving its political aims and hence may not be able to claim complete 'victory'. Poland in the Second World War (WW II) ended up on the victorious side but was still doomed to be a part of the 'Iron Curtain' for almost half a century. So, did Poland achieve 'victory' in WW II? Again, Germany was vanquished in WW II and yet today it is one of the major powers in Europe. Therefore, mere military victory may not imply durable peace and prosperity. The ultimate key to the victory in war is the 'achievement of political goals' and rather than 'destruction of the enemy' or 'capture of the territory'.³

Origins and Definition of Victory

The word 'victory' is derived from the Latin *Victoria* meaning "the defeat of enemy in battle", or the gaining of superiority or success in any struggle or competition.⁴ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, 'victory' refers to "the position or state of having overcome an enemy or adversary in combat, battle, or war; supremacy or superiority achieved as a result of armed conflict".⁵

There are also some other words used to convey the meaning of victory. The word 'success' is derived from the Latin word *Successus* meaning the "achievement of something desired,

planned or attempted”.⁶ The most common synonym for victory is ‘win’ which is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *Winnan* meaning “to gain victory or to be successful”.⁷ Another synonym is ‘prevail’, derived from the Latin word *Praevalere* which means “to be strong, to overcome, to gain victory or advantage”. It also means to possess greater strength or influence.⁸

Thus, the word victory encompasses a diverse array of meanings— it is an ‘all-purpose word’ used to describe imprecisely the concept of success in war.⁹

Meaning of Victory

Victory, in military condition implies, the enemy’s greater loss of material strength, his loss of morale, and his open admission of the above by giving up his intentions.¹⁰ However, in war, the result is never final; even the ultimate outcome of a war is not always to be regarded as final as the defeated state often considers the outcome merely as a ‘transitory evil’.¹¹ Also, a military victory comprises two components— its physical reality and its psychological impact. It is the task of diplomacy to translate the latter into political terms.¹² Hence, victory on the battlefield merely creates favourable conditions for diplomacy to take to its desired political outcomes.

Therefore, only destruction of the enemy cannot be the military aim.¹³ Again, military victory is not an end in itself¹⁴— victory is achieved when the state finally achieves its goals¹⁵ that is achieving its political outcomes or a long lasting peace. War is about politics, and consequently victory, in the end, is a political matter.¹⁶

Victory in Nuclear Age

A man’s quest for destroying the enemy, since the dawn of warfare, culminated in the nuclear weapons which are the ‘epitome of destructive power’. A total war, involving the use of nuclear weapons, will lead to a ‘cataclysm and there will be no clear winners. Therefore, faced with the spectre of total nuclear war, it is a moot point if war continues to be a rational choice — whether it could be the extension of a rational policy to another domain.¹⁷ If nuclear weapons are used in any war, then it will lead to destruction and disruption of not only the armed forces but also the population centres and ‘victory’ itself will lose its political relevance. Therefore, in the nuclear age, no victory would be worth the price.¹⁸ Thus, until now, the chief purpose of the military establishment was only to win wars, but in the nuclear

age, the chief purpose became to 'averting wars'.¹⁹ The costs and penalties for victory in the nuclear age must be kept from going beyond the level of tolerance.²⁰ When governments are informed of the terrible consequences of war, they realise that there can be no victors.²¹ A nuclear stalemate can be taken to mean that victory, in an all-out war, has become meaningless.²²

Hence, in the nuclear age, the whole concept of victory becomes meaningless—if two or more adversaries are nuclear armed, the endeavour is to keep limit the war below the nuclear threshold.

Levels of Victory

Victory possesses various shades especially on the battlefield. These are summarised as under:

- **Tactical Victory.** In tactical victory, the state or an army achieves victory in a battle or in a series of military engagements.²³ Since, tactical victory can be gauged by various quantifiable parameters such as initial and final force ratios, area captured, number of tanks or guns or aircrafts destroyed, prisoners of war captured etc., therefore, it can be effectively assessed. This level of victory represents a 'disproportionately' large share of the total number of victories in war.²⁴
- **Operational Victory.** Operational victory is transparent at least in its purest form—the campaign succeeds or fails based on the criteria that are usually well understood and quantifiable.²⁵ An operational victory, based on winning a series of battles in a campaign, is likely increase the 'quantifiable parameters' of a tactical victory. An operational victory may or may not yield a strategic victory, but it is in a better position vis-à-vis tactical victory. After a successful operational campaign, some of the political and strategic objectives are achieved. Hence, it is more important than a tactical victory.
- **Strategic Victory.** Strategic victory is often associated with the national level. Tactical and operational successes may set the stage for strategic victory, but they are not sufficient in themselves.²⁶ Strategic victory, at the national level, will result in achievement of almost all political goals and objectives. The effects of strategic

military victory will also resonate at the national level and will lead to a change in power dynamics of the region or the world.

If war is a political act, then 'victory', at the highest levels, will also be defined in political terms. The implication is that tactical or operational victory, without favourable political outcomes, is sterile, and the same has been reasonably assessed.²⁷

Strategic Victory: The Trump Card

Though, all victories are undeniably important, nevertheless, it is the 'strategic victory' that trumps all others. In war, finally what matters is the strategic outcome, irrespective of the number of victories or defeats. As an example, even though USA had won most, if not all, of the tactical battles in Vietnam, ultimately USA lost the war.²⁸ Therefore, even though tactical and operational successes may set the stage for strategic victory, but they are not sufficient in themselves to secure the political objectives.

Dilemmas of Victory in the 21st Century Warfare

In the present day context, it is becoming increasingly difficult to claim victory by any of the belligerents involved in a war. Some of the dilemmas are outlined as under:

- ***Merging of Combatants and Civilians.*** The concept of victory was fairly simple in the earlier epochs when few battles, in few days, fought by the combatants on the battlefields, decided the outcome of the war. However, times have changed much since then and today, with the advent of hybrid warfare and fifth generation warfare, the difference between combatants and non-combatants is diminishing, with non-state actors waging wars against the uniformed troops of the states. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to 'quantify casualties and attrition' which once were the benchmarks leading to victory.
- ***Spectrum of Conflict.*** The spectrum of conflict has now become diffused especially when many domains have been added to the military domain; and within the military domain, there are now five sub-domains viz. land, sea, air, cyber and space. Therefore, one may win the battle in a particular sub-domain and lose in the other; or despite winning in all sub-domains, one may yet lose the narrative and/or not attain the political objectives.

- **Levels of Warfare.** The genre of well-differentiated levels of warfare like tactical, operational and strategic is *passé* and these levels are no longer as distinctly applicable as earlier epochs. Therefore, an ‘action by a tactical force’ (say about 30-40 troops) may ‘achieve strategic outcomes’ or the ‘use of a strategic asset’ (like a bomber) may only ‘yield tactical victories’. In today’s scenario, the old concept that, victory in the tactical domain (i.e. fighting for few hours or a day or two on the battlefield) yields strategic effects that ultimately leads to the emergence or downfall of kings and empires — is no longer valid.
- **War against Intangibles.** Today, many battles are being waged against intangibles like ‘terrorism’, ‘fundamentalism’, ‘culture’ etc. The meaning of ‘victory’ in these conflicts is increasingly becoming a complex issue. This further complicates the grasping of victory and its metrics.
- **Wars in Cyberspace.** How do you ‘win’ in cyberspace? Even though cyber attacks are increasingly becoming common, they have their own inherent problems like attribution, intensity, effects and proportionality of response. Nevertheless, they constitute actions akin to acts of ‘war of the yore’ and hence needs to be defended against and also be won. But it imposes serious limitations as to what ‘really’ constitutes victory in the cyber domain.
- **Cognitive Domain and Narratives.** The very fact of cognitive domain gaining importance in the last few years implies that, to secure victory, maximum military power may not be applied. Therefore, force application is now being ‘dictated’ by the narrative which is to be countered or achieved. This poses a serious dilemma on nation-states and demands re-inventing rules of warfare and the metrics of victory.
- **Shifting Political Objectives.** The US Global War on Terror (GWOT) lasted for about 20 years (2001-2021). Even though Osama Bin Laden was killed in 2011— which was initially a major metric of victory, yet the US troops continued to stay in Afghanistan till August 2021. This implies that over such a long time span, political objectives changed and hence the achievement of victory became difficult.
- **Religious and Ideological Wars.** As per the Westphalian framework, winning wars is comparatively easy. However, when it comes to fighting an ideology like communism or Jihad, then it is extremely complex to declare final victory. At best, there will be times when some of the military objectives will be achieved and



temporary peace will be achieved. This condition then sets the stage for political negotiations to attain permanent conflict resolution. However, if such opportunities are missed, then one will enter another cycle of waging a series of battles.

- **Inadequacy of Augustine Doctrinal Tenets.** The concepts of *Jus ad bellum*, *jus in bello* and *jus post bella* can be refined and applied successfully in a state vs. state framework. However, these are incongruous with today's wars of terrorism and fundamentalism. Hence, there is a need for a new framework to quantify victory in a non-state vs. state framework.
- **Post War Order.** Consequent to war termination and cessation of hostilities, there is a need to re-draw the political order of the region as per the new power equation. This demands 'mature and perspicacious statesmanship'. Various options like balance of power by self-restraint, hegemony by ruling over the vanquished state or erecting new institutions to implement order are available. However, in the 21st century context, fighting and winning against non-state actors and winning the narrative in the cognitive domain is beset with problems of securing lasting peace by a new local, regional or a global world order.

If strategic victory is finally what counts, then what are the ingredients of this strategic victory, especially so in the face of 21st century predicaments as enunciated earlier.

The Edifice of Strategic Victory in the 21st Century

Let us now delve into the realm of securing strategic victory, despite all these odds. The pillars of this edifice are imperative to be implemented by India to secure victory and achieve the desired strategic and political outcomes. These pillars are enumerated in brief in the succeeding paragraphs.

- **Strategic Assessments: Ways, Means and Ends.** Viewed from the perspective of 'ways and means to secure strategic ends', it is imperative to have a 'correct and pragmatic assessment' of what can and more importantly what cannot be achieved through a "clash of wills"— before embarking upon a military campaign, it is essential to know your enemy down to the last detail, and only then one must venture out. In the Second World War, Germany's doomed decision, to invade USSR in June 1941, could be attributed to the overestimation of its military strength in relation to Soviet

military power. Commenting in August 1941 on Guderian's 1937 estimates of Soviet tank strength, Hitler told Guderian, "If I had known that the figures for Russian tank strength which you gave in your book were in fact the true ones, I would not ever have started this war".²⁹ Therefore, the most far-reaching act of judgment, that the statesman and commander have to make, is to establish the 'kind of war' on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it 'for', nor trying to turn it 'into', something that is alien to its nature.³⁰

- **Mobilisation of Resources.** A nation should mobilise its resources in consonance with its political goals. If 'strategic victory' in the classical realm is the aim, then all the nation's resources vis. Diplomatic, Informational, Military, Political, Economic, Technological (DIMPET), are mobilised. If only 'operational victory' is the aim, then primarily all the military resources and some national resources should be mobilised. Similarly, for merely tactical victories, only the military forces need to be mobilised. Therefore, the level of victory is related to the state's mobilisation for war.³¹
- **Calibrated Prosecution of Military Operations.** When the adversary's armed forces are defeated, at the operational level, and most of its war waging potential severely degraded, then the foundation of a strategic victory has been laid. However, this objective puts greater strain on one's military and economic resources. Also, if a state pursues victory on a strategic scale, then it can motivate the enemy's military forces and civil population to offer greater resistance. Thus, there is a need to calibrate such prosecution of military plans and accordingly adequate space for the execution of Calibrated Responses Short of War (CRESHOW) in the continuum of war. Nevertheless, the bare minimum aim should be to achieve an operational victory which can become the edifice for achieving the desired strategic outcome(s).
- **Keep the Sword Arm Ready.** The armed forces, as the decisive instrument of the state, must be proficient in planning for war and consequent successful prosecution of operations. This will ensure that the nation's will is imposed over the enemy through 'blood and iron', even if all other resources fail. Accordingly, it is *de rigueur* that sufficient funds are earmarked in the Annual Defence Budget for procuring technologically requisite weapon systems and equipping the nation's armed forces. There cannot be any capability voids and lacunae in the organisational structures. Again, incisive doctrinal tenets, in accordance with the aim of securing decisive

victory, must cater for victory across the spectrum and domains of warfare. Accordingly, new organisational structures must be erected and obsolete ones discarded. Also, due attention needs to be paid to the honing of intangibles like leadership, discipline, morale, through myriad pathways of Professional Military Education (PME), prudent Human Resource (HR) policies, career growth options, training curriculum and discipline. Only then, can the armed forces be sufficiently ready to be effectively utilised to produce desired outcomes in terms of crisis.

- ***Favourable Narratives in the Cognitive Domain.*** It is imperative to not only 'secure victory in the physical domain' but also to 'win the battle of narratives' in the cognitive domain wherein views and counter views, propaganda, truths, half-truths & alternative truths, etc. are all ubiquitous. Denying the enemy even a modicum of notion of victory, is more essential than actually capturing some key military objectives. Thus, erecting suitable organisational structures, at the apex level, is a pre-requisite for achieving victory in the cognitive domain.
- ***Political Settlement vs. Military Victories.*** The emergence and spread of hybrid warfare, involving state and non-state actors, yields the axiomatic option of political settlements prior to a complete decimation of a non-state organisation, which may be undesirable in terms of cost and time. Therefore, in non-Westphalian constructs, political settlements must be the preferred option after successful compellence and CRESHOW to force a 'pragmatic negotiated advantageous peace' rather than aiming for the utopian decisive victory.
- ***Perspicacious Post Conflict Obligations.*** Victory imposes certain 'social justice costs' on the victor. This cost comprises the decision to 'support or guide the efforts of the defeated society' to rebuild itself.³² This is in consonance with ancient thoughts of conquering the enemy even beyond the battlefields. Once victory is achieved in war, it requires extreme sagacity to use that victory for long lasting political stability and peace. Therefore, it needs greater wisdom and great skill to 'positively exploit victory'.³³ Hence, post conflict obligations must make allowance for the Thucydides' Triptych of "fear, honour and interest of the vanquished". After the First World War (WW 1), the victorious nations including Britain and France signed the Treaty of Versailles that heaped indignation on Germany, which laid the foundation for the Second World War. Thus, peace was short lived and the fruits of victory could not be

reaped. On the contrary, the Marshall Plan for rebuilding Europe and the aid to Japan after WW 2 by the US, cemented US military victory in WW 2 and ensured a longer peace. Therefore, post conflict negotiations must be the 'guiding beacon' for long lasting peace.

- **Securing Victory.** Despite attaining comprehensive military victory — tactical, operational and strategic, in 1971, India squandered away a golden opportunity to secure long lasting peace. By 1989, the western adversary had unleashed proxy war in J&K, hence, the peace of 1971 lasted for only 18 years. Therefore, ensuring that a similar opportunity is not lost in the future, the following options for securing victory can be considered:
 - **Change in Status Quo.** After a strategic victory, the relationship between the victor and the vanquished nation is transformed. At its most extreme, a change in the status quo can be akin to the Carthaginian peace wherein the state is annihilated and has no hope that its current government, leadership and economy will survive.³⁴ Thus, the victor becomes the 'permanent master of the vanquished'. In today's context, in the Indian sub-continent, erasing 'one nation-state' from the political map of the world, may no longer be a viable prospect, especially nuclear armed nations. However, the dismemberment of the enemy into smaller nation-states is possible under ripe circumstances, especially for India's western adversary.
 - **Regime Change.** Alternatively, a regime change of the adversary, with a favourably disposed government, assumes importance and is the most comprehensive degree of change in the status quo. Toppling a hostile government after a victory in war and replacing it with a government which is favourably disposed towards the victor, is an ideal way of securing a strategic victory. This option is pragmatic in case of vast asymmetries especially in terms of geography and Comprehensive National Power (CNP). In the Indian context, enhancing the CNP and then seeking a favourable policy, by dissuading the two adversaries, is a pragmatic option of securing victory, even sans fighting an actual war.

- **New Strategic Relationship.** Forging close ties with the defeated nation- state with a view of securing long term peace, is an important facet of strategic victory. This may involve rebuilding the economic and social infrastructure, aligning the defeated state's foreign policy, putting in place a government with a favourable disposition and so on. In the Indian context, this can be achieved by executing various options in the deterrence-compellence dyad before an all-out war or immediately after a short duration preventive non-nuclear limited war. However, this must be backed up by strong armed forces to preclude opening of hostilities.
- **Advantageous Negotiated Settlement with Non State Actors.** While dealing with non-state actors and organisations, it is better to ensure that the military wing is decapitated and the political head of the organisation is co-opted in the overall settlement with mutually agreeable sharing of power at appropriate hierarchical levels. This is more so in the case of internal insurgencies. For proxy wars wherein support is provisioned by an inimical neighbour, a *quid pro quo* response in the adversary's home soil, to inflict pain and extract leverage, pays a better dividend for securing the national objectives. This can definitely be pursued to gain leverage and extract favourable tangible strategic outcomes in the DIMPET domains as desired.
- **Economic Entanglement.** A foe can be turned into a friend if the economies get entangled and a war threatens to disrupt prosperity on both sides of the border. Therefore, strengthening trade with one's enemies, over a long period of time, will reduce the threat of war, as then the political outcomes for both will hinge on continued economic benefits.
- **No Final Victory.** Even if one nation defeats the other in a war at any given point of time, the 'defeated state' may not accept the state of affairs and may wait for an opportune moment before regrouping its strength and then launching an attack. Thus, the 'defeated state' often considers the outcome merely as a transitory evil, for which a remedy may still be found in political conditions at some later date.³⁵



Therefore, it is imperative to keep the guard up even after a strategic victory and peace has been won.

Conclusion

It is evident that there are various shades and nuances of ‘victory’ and complex challenges in the 21st century to secure victory. Addressing these challenges and then erecting and cementing the edifice of ‘victory’ remains a key national security objective in the 21st century. It is imperative that any state, embarking upon war, be clear as to what will be the desired end state after the war — on and off the battlefields.

The edifice of ‘strategic victory’, as enunciated, must be further refined for a particular conflict and then implemented to secure the ultimate strategic victory i.e. not only to decimate the enemy on the battlefield but also to achieve the laid down political objectives and to secure long lasting, minimum half a century, of peace. To achieve this, the enemy has to acknowledge defeat on the battlefields and give up its political objectives. This therefore remains the ultimate aim of war.

End Notes

¹ Maharbal was one of the cavalry commanders of Hannibal. After the great victory over the Romans at Cannae in 216 BC, the Roman Historian Livy describes an exchange— possibly apocryphal, between Maharbal and Hannibal wherein Maharbal claimed that he could be in Rome in five days, presumably by a quick cavalry march. However, Hannibal showed reluctance, and then Maharbal, by Livy’s account, responded, “So the gods have not blessed one man with every gift. You know how to win a victory, Hannibal, but not how to use it”. For further reading, see Livy, *Hannibal’s War*, translated by JC Yardley, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009. ISBN 9780199555970.

² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated and edited by Sir Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 7.

³ William C Martel, *Victory in War: Foundations of Modern Military Policy*, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 33. ISBN 978-0521859561.

⁴ Ibid, p. 85.

⁵ The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edition, 1989, p. 610.

⁶ N.3, p. 86.

⁷ Ibid, p. 84

⁸ N.6.

⁹ Ibid, p. 87.

¹⁰ N.2, p. 75 and p. 234.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 80.

¹² Henry Kissinger, quoted in W. Freeman Jr., *The Diplomats’ Dictionary*, Washington DC: National Defence University Press, 1996, p. 395.

¹³ N.2, p. 566.



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- ¹⁹ Ibid, p. 76.
- ²⁰ Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959, p. 314.
- ²¹ Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War: Three Lectures and Several Suggestions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961, p. 11.
- ²² Henry A Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957, p. 86.
- ²³ N.3, p. 95
- ²⁴ Ibid, p. 96
- ²⁵ N.16.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context*, Carlisle, PA., US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 5th edition, 1989, p. 1. Colonel Harry Summers was talking to a North Vietnamese officer after the Vietnam War. Summers commented that the US had won all the battles, and the North Vietnamese replied, "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant".
- ²⁹ Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, Constantine Fitzgibbon, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1952, p. 190.
- ³⁰ N.2, p. 88.
- ³¹ N.3, p. 100.
- ³² Ibid, p. 101.
- ³³ N.12.
- ³⁴ Hans J Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power*, 5th edition, New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1973, p. 3. ISBN 9780394317120.
- ³⁵ N.2, p. 8.

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