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Redefining the Centre of Gravity: Strategic Adaptation in the Multi-Domain Era

AB Shivane

CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES

Field Marshal Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw, better known as Sam "Bahadur", was the 8th Chief of the Army Staff (COAS). It was under his command that the Indian forces achieved a spectacular victory in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. Starting from 1932, when he joined the first batch at the Indian Military Academy (IMA), his distinguished military career spanned over four decades and five wars, including World War II. He was the first of only two Field Marshals in the Indian Army. Sam Manekshaw's contributions to the Indian Army are legendary. He was a soldier's soldier and a General's General. He was outspoken and stood by his convictions. He was immensely popular within the Services and among civilians of all ages. Boyish charm, wit and humour were other notable qualities of independent India's best known soldier. Apart from hardcore military affairs, the Field Marshal took immense interest in strategic studies and national security issues. Owing to this unique blend of qualities, a grateful nation honoured him with the Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan in 1968 and 1972 respectively.

Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw, MC
1914-2008

CLAWS Occasional Papers are dedicated to the memory of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw

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Contents

- **Abstract.....5**
- **Clausewitz in the Age of Multidomain Conflict.....6**
- **The Multidomain Battlespace.....7**
- **Traditional Domains under New Pressures.....9**
- **Cyberspace as a Decisive Arena.....9**
- **Space as a Contested Domain.....10**
- **The Information and Cognitive Domain.....10**
- **Interconnectedness of Domains.....11**
- **Revisiting the Centre of Gravity.....11**
- **Limits of Classical Centre of Gravity in Modern Warfare.....12**
- **India's Strategic Dilemma.....15**
- **Redefining Centre of Gravity in the Multidomain Environment.....15**
- **Recent Examples of CoG and Lessons from Conflicts.....16**
- **C5ISR as the Centre of Gravity in the Digital Age.....18**
- **Conceptual Framing.....18**
- **Analytic Method: The Five-Step Pipeline.....19**
- **Targeting Philosophy.....20**
- **Lesson for India.....21**
- **Pakistan: Controlled Instability Under Nuclear Cover.....23**
- **China: System Destruction and Grey-Zone Pressure.....24**
- **The Dual Front Challenge.....26**

- **Operational and Strategic Recommendations 27**
- **National C5ISR Fusion Grid 27**
- **Functional Integration Beyond Symbolism 28**
- **Resilient Command and Control.....30**
- **Cyber, Space, and Electromagnetic Spectrum as a Triad.....30**
- **Precision Fires and Air Defence that Close the Loop 31**
- **Maritime Posture that Turns Geography into Leverage 31**
- **Land Warfare Challenges for the High Altitude and the Plains 32**
- **Whole-of-Nation Resilience 33**
- **Strategic Communications.....34**
- **Training, PME, and HR Talent 34**
- **Technology Sprints with Real Delivery.....35**
- **Escalation Management.....35**
- **Conclusion 36**
- **References 37**

Redefining the Centre of Gravity: Strategic Adaptation in the Multi-Domain Era

Abstract

Clausewitz's concept of the Schwerpunkt (centre of gravity) has long been central to operational planning. He described it as the 'hub of all power and movement', the focal point where force must be applied to produce decisive results. While this idea remains vital, the way that the hub is formed has evolved. In today's battlespace, the centre of gravity is rarely a single unit or location. Instead, it is a system: interconnected capabilities and support functions, logistics, sensing, command, and narrative control, whose disruption causes outsized effects.

This paper redefines the centre of gravity for multi-domain operations and applies that definition to the Indian subcontinent's plains facing Pakistan and the northern high-altitude sector facing China. Drawing lessons from recent conflicts, the paper argues that the Schwerpunkt in future warfare must be built on C5ISR, which empowers, fuses, and enables precise convergence across land, sea, air, space, cyber, and cognitive domains to achieve a superior kill chain. Ultimately, success is determined not by possession of platforms but by maintaining systemic coherence under stress and the ability to fracture that coherence in the adversary at a decisive tempo.

This issue brief offers strategic and operational recommendations for the Indian Armed Forces to deter, deny, and defeat future threats in a multidomain operational environment.

Clausewitz in the Age of Multidomain Conflict

When Clausewitz first discussed the Centre of Gravity, he did so in an era of massed formations and geographic concentration. For him, the COG was the concentrated source of an adversary's strength, whether in its army, capital, leadership, or alliances. Throughout much of the industrial age, this concept remained relevant. The collapse of armies, the fall of capitals, or the destruction of key infrastructure often ended wars. Historically, the hub was tangible: a fielded force, a capital, or a ruling authority.

The twenty-first-century multidomain conflict complicates that simple hypothesis. Today, power is distributed across networks, yet its logic remains centripetal. What has changed is not the principle, but the architecture through which power flows. The proliferation of satellites, open source imagery, drones, cyber tools, data networks, and algorithmic fusion means that power is generated and maintained by networks of people, machines, and data. The centre of gravity in this environment is often an integrative function rather than a physical, tangible entity.

The proliferation of technology, weaponisation of information, and the rise of grey-zone coercion suggest that an enemy no longer has a single clear point of vulnerability. Instead, they are resilient through dispersal, adaptation, and ambiguity. Examples include Russia's use of hybrid warfare in Ukraine, China's militarisation of information and economic tools, and non-state groups employing digital propaganda. The battlefield now focuses as much on perception and narrative as on firepower and manoeuvre.

The strategic weakness of India today is not the absence of platforms but the risk of fragmented coherence in the context of multidomain warfare. An adversary does not need to eliminate Indian formations on the battlefield; instead, they can disrupt the coordination among sensors, decision-makers, logistics, and

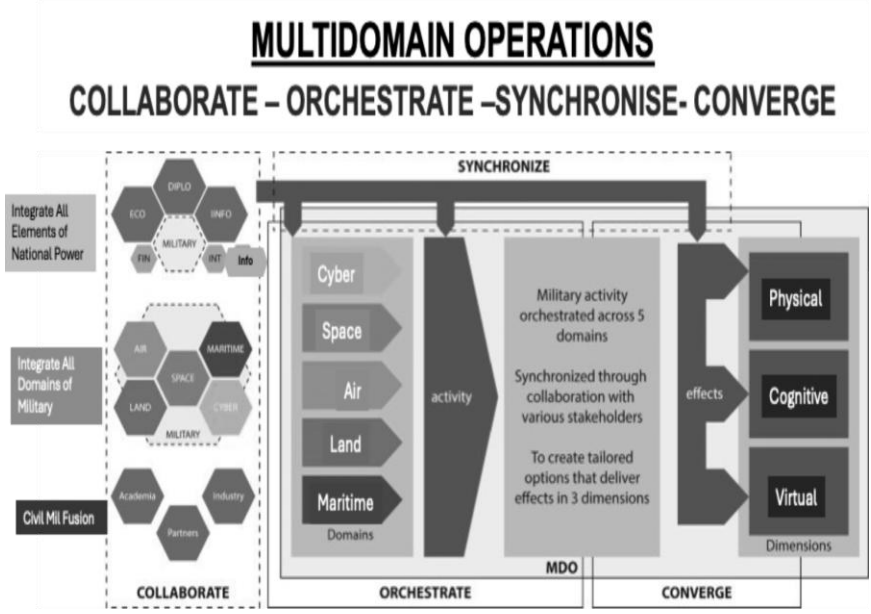
narratives to cause instability. That unified order within the system represents the modern centre of gravity. The battle increasingly focuses on maintaining rhythm while creating dislocation in the enemy's cycle.

For India, the challenge of CoG redefinition is especially operationally critical. Pakistan uses proxy warfare and nuclear deterrence to limit Indian options. China employs salami-slicing tactics and strategic coercion, along with cyberattacks, information warfare, and economic asymmetry, to challenge India. The two rivals have also learned to exploit India's internal weaknesses, including its dependence on digital infrastructure and the cognitive vulnerability of its society.

In such a landscape, the Clausewitzian CoG cannot be discarded; rather, it must be expanded. ***The critical question is not where the enemy's "centre" lies in the classical sense, but which dependencies, when disrupted, can alter their will or capacity to fight, while safeguarding India's own. Success will depend not only on platform counts but also on the ability to identify systemic centres of gravity, protect one's own critical requirements, and apply convergent cross-domain effects at an overwhelming tempo. That is the modern Schwerpunkt, often identified as the C5ISR—still the hub of all power and movement.***

The Multidomain Battlespace

The domains of warfare are rapidly evolving beyond traditional categories of land, sea, and air. The nature of conflict has been transformed by the introduction of cyberspace, space, and the cognitive domain to the forefront of competition. These are not merely abstract additions but operational realities. Beyond domain expansion, the real challenge lies in interdomain synergy and resilience.



(Diagram Courtesy: No Multi-Domain Operations without Interoperability by Democura)

The purpose of multidomain operations is to coordinate simultaneous challenges across land, sea, air, cyber, space, and cognitive domains in a way that overwhelms the adversary's ability to prioritise responses. This also includes non-military capabilities and effects. Sometimes, the information environment is also involved, spanning all domains.

The key determinant of success in MDO will be information superiority and decision dominance rather than brute strength. Therefore, C5ISR will serve as the primary node, with all other means and pathways acting as lines of effort.

Recent conflicts have demonstrated that decisive blows often occur outside the visible battlefield. The Russian war in Ukraine was not limited to missile salvos and armoured thrusts; it was

preceded by cyber disruptions of government servers and followed by sustained disinformation campaigns.

Traditional Domains under New Pressures

The wars of the past decade show that no modern conflict is limited to just one domain. All domains are interconnected and form networks of dependencies, which produce effects or are targeted. In the case of India, this is not merely an academic shift but a crucial factor for success in future battlespace.

Land, maritime, and air power remain the currency of state strength, yet their utility is increasingly influenced by external domains. In Ukraine, columns of armour were immobilised not by opposing tanks but by a combination of loitering munitions, drones, and precision artillery enabled by digital networks. Land warfare, while central to territorial conflicts, is increasingly facing multidomain threats. Sea control is similarly contested. For India, sea control is essential, as most trade and energy supplies pass through the maritime domain; any maritime vulnerability can directly lead to economic fragility. The aerospace domain is also a key part of the multidomain kill chain, both kinetic and non-kinetic. Force superiority without cross-domain integration and resilience will no longer be a decisive factor in battle.

Cyberspace as a Decisive Arena

The cyber dimension has become the defining modern contested battlespace. Adversaries do not need large armies to cause paralysis; they require access to code and system vulnerabilities. India has already experienced Chinese and Pakistani intrusions targeting power grids and financial networks. Unlike nuclear arsenals, cyber weapons are not controlled by superpowers. They can be developed by small states or even lone actors. This dispersal of power has challenged traditional

hierarchies and added a new layer to strategy. The key measure of cyber power is not the number of servers or malware but the adaptability, stability of networks, and innovativeness of operators. These are not minor actions; they threaten the functioning of the state and can undermine confidence in governance without any gunfire. Therefore, cyber power must be seen as both an independent domain and a continuous aspect of conventional conflict.

Space as a Contested Domain

Space has shifted from being solely a scientific domain to a vital component of national security. The People's Liberation Army views space dominance as crucial for informationised warfare. China's 2007 anti-satellite test and its ongoing deployment of reconnaissance and communication satellites showcase a strategic approach aimed at threatening adversary space assets. India's dependence on satellites for communications, navigation, and missile guidance presents a notable vulnerability. The Defence Space Agency and the launch of dedicated surveillance satellites like EMISAT indicate progress, though gaps remain in revisit time and launch capacity, especially compared to China's integrated Strategic Support Force. To establish credible deterrence, efforts should focus on protecting existing assets, deploying PNT satellite constellations, and developing rapid replenishment capabilities. Space continues to be a key domain for multi-domain operations and a major element in C5ISR architecture.

The Information and Cognitive Domain

Perhaps the most disruptive aspect of multidomain warfare involves manipulating the information space and targeting the cognitive domain. Narratives influence perceptions of victory, legitimacy, and trust. Disinformation campaigns undermine public confidence and cause psychological paralysis, with social media

and deepfakes serving as modern tools of cognitive warfare. In the digital age, success is measured not by territory or casualties but by societal trust. Even a few successful hacks, amplified by false stories, can create the illusion of systemic collapse. For India, this is a realistic threat. During crises with China and Pakistan, disinformation peaks, aiming to exploit social divisions and generate institutional uncertainty. The true Centre of Gravity (CoG) in such situations is societal resilience, not military strength.

Interconnectedness of Domains

The defining feature of multidomain warfare is not merely the existence of multiple arenas but their convergence and interconnectedness. A cyberattack on communications can blunt an air strike. A satellite disruption can cripple ground command and control. A viral disinformation campaign can erode political will to fight. The adversary that masters cross-domain integration gains a disproportionate advantage.

China's doctrine aims to cause paralysis rather than total destruction. It seeks to blind sensors, dislocate command chains, and shorten decision-making cycles before kinetic dominance becomes necessary. The contest is therefore a matter of timing. The side that restores coherence more quickly will win.

India's doctrines are still evolving in this direction, but the key point is clear: no domain can be approached in isolation. For India, the risk is fighting domain by domain while adversaries develop integrated capabilities across multiple domains. Organisational division, not battlefield weakness, is the more likely cause of strategic disadvantage.

Revisiting the Centre of Gravity

Clausewitz's original metaphor remained relevant because, at every technological level, war continues to depend on hubs of will,

logistics, and C5ISR. Over time, theorists have developed more systematic methods to identify and evaluate centres of gravity. The most practical approach today differentiates critical capabilities, critical requirements, and critical vulnerabilities. The first reveals what the adversary can do. The second describes what is necessary for that capability to function. The third shows where the adversary is most vulnerable.

In the multi-domain age, a centre of gravity is not always the most valuable asset; it is often the integrative node or set of nodes whose impairment causes the greatest cascading loss of coherence. The hub remains the C5ISR, and the lines of effort include satellites and space stations, datalinks connecting sensors to shooters, logistics scheduling software, warfighting infrastructure, morale, and narrative ecosystems. It is the point where disruption causes strategic disproportion. Therefore, focus must be on fracturing the adversary's coherence while preserving one's own.

Limits of Classical Centre of Gravity in Modern Warfare

Clausewitz saw war as a contest between states with centralised power. The capital, army, or monarch could serve as a crucial point; attack there, and the enemy falls. The model assumed linearity and concentration, where strength stemmed from identifiable nodes that could be targeted and destroyed. This approach worked well during Napoleon's time, when states were bureaucratically centralised and wars often ended with a single decisive battle.

That clarity is absent today. Present-day adversaries decentralise, create redundancy, and blur the boundaries between civilian and military resources. Several characteristics of modern warfare reveal the limits of classical CoG.

The prominence and use of unmanned aerial systems during the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict altered the outlook of the modern

battle environment. Ukraine is no exception: its military resistance, Western support, and information dominance all work together to generate a multiplying effect. Trying to identify a single decisive CoG risks oversimplification.

India's own history illustrates this. During the Kargil War of 1999, Pakistan's CoG was not its army headquarters in Rawalpindi or its fragile economy, but the tactical occupation of mountain posts that threatened the security of the national highway. The conflict's centre lay in geography and perception rather than classical nodes of power. Kargil demonstrated that even under a nuclear threat, the decisive factor was India's ability to balance military restraint with diplomatic legitimacy. The operational CoG rested not only on recapturing heights but also on maintaining international credibility while denying Pakistan escalation space.

Similarly, during the 2019 Balakot crisis, Pakistan used nuclear signalling to address its vulnerabilities, leading to a resolution without escalation or lasting punishment.

The **India-China Galwan clash in 2020** introduced the three warfare Chinese doctrine (psychological, media, and legal), combined with physical intrusions and a blame game. The clash was surrounded by narrative warfare aimed at affecting morale and willpower. China's CoG was not just its local military units but its ability to merge force with narrative control, capturing ground while shaping the information environment to prevent escalation. India's own CoG was the resilience of its forces and the political will to resist coercion. The highlights that, in limited confrontations, the CoG relies on political resolve or narrative dominance rather than on military strength.

Operation Sindoor demonstrated that the CoG in limited conflict lies in the integrity of the C5ISR web that connects intelligence, cyber effects, precision fires, and narrative

management into a coherent sequence. The operation showed that even slight degradation in data fusion or electronic suppression could slow the tempo enough to weaken escalation dominance. The lesson was clear: maintaining tempo is systemic, not platform-driven.

This operation highlighted the importance of identifying and targeting not only military CoG but also economic, informational, diplomatic, and cyber dimensions. The adversarial environment, with its decentralised networks and hybrid warfare tactics, requires a holistic strategic approach. This necessitated a joint effort among the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Cyber Force, ensuring seamless civil-military integration. As cyberspace and the cognitive domain become more prominent than the battlefield, the lessons of Operation Sindoor emphasise the need for India to stay strategically coherent. Redefining the CoG to consist of a network of mutually dependent components rather than a central node will help India better navigate 21st-century warfare and maintain its competitive edge.

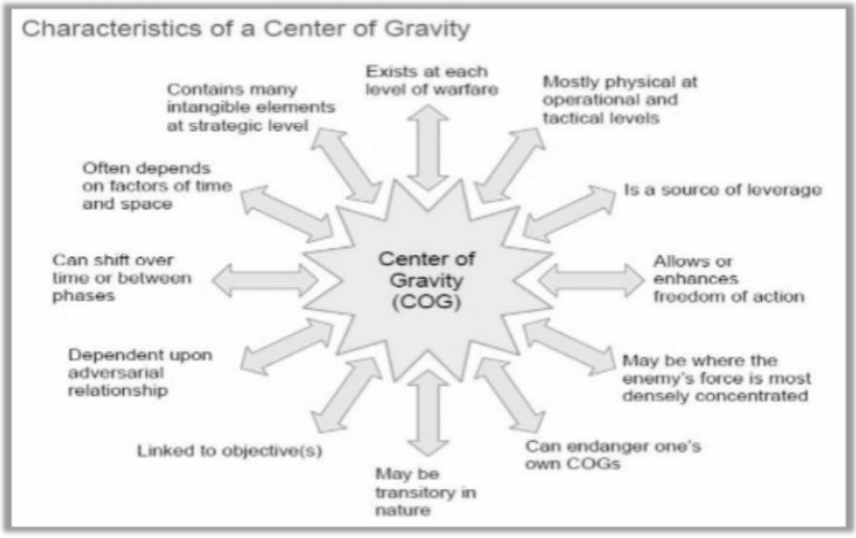
Non-state actors further weaken the concept. Terror organisations like Lashkar-e-Taiba or Jaish-e-Mohammed are organised in cells to survive decapitation. Executing leaders does not stop their activities, as new leaders emerge who are often more radical than their predecessors. The American experience with al-Qaeda and ISIS confirms this pattern. For India, Pakistan's use of proxy groups means that the traditional search for a centre of gravity is almost useless. The enemy's resilience depends on its decentralisation and radicalisation.

The paradox is that decentralisation itself becomes the focal point. Destroying a node does not cause the system to fail; instead, it prompts regeneration. ***Therefore, strategy should focus on the enabling ecosystem rather than the visible instrument.***

India's Strategic Dilemma

India faces two adversaries that embody the limitations of classical CoG analysis. In both cases, searching for a singular CoG risks misdiagnosis. The focus must be to reinterpret the concept as a web of interlinked dependencies: political, technological, informational, and social.

Redefining Centre of Gravity in the Multidomain Environment



To define the Centre of Gravity in a multidomain era, it is important to identify its characteristics. (Diagram Courtesy: Centre of Gravity Analysis: The Marine Corps Planning Process Needs to Catch Up By Hemming Lee W)

Redefined Centre of Gravity: The centre of gravity for multi-domain operations is the collection of interconnected systemic capabilities and supporting functions that allow an adversary to generate and maintain coherent freedom of power at the necessary tempo and timing to achieve its desired effects.

This systemic view demands that planners shift from asking what to destroy to asking what relationship to disrupt. Effects are generated not merely by eliminating assets but by severing dependencies. No system remains coherent without political clarity. Strategic hesitation transmits downward faster than electronic disruption, eroding alignment across military and diplomatic instruments.

First, systemic character. Centres of gravity are webs of capabilities sustained by networks of requirements. Finding them requires mapping systems rather than counting platforms.

Second, effect orientation. The degradation can be both kinetic and non-kinetic, and includes cyber, electronic degradation, or informational form, which are often more decisive than kinetic destruction.

Third, time sensitivity. The modern hub often offers only brief, time-sensitive windows of vulnerability; coordinating convergent effects during these opportunities is crucial.

Translating definition into practice requires an analytic method that identifies candidate subsystems, enumerates critical capabilities, lists critical requirements, detects critical vulnerabilities, and assesses resilience options.

Recent Examples of CoG and Lessons from Conflicts

Conflict / Operation	Timeframe	Classical CoG	Real CoG (Multidomain)	Key Lesson
Afghanistan (US/NATO)	2001–2021	Taliban leaders	Local legitimacy, funding, popular acquiescence	Governance, not firepower, determines outcomes in insurgencies.

Conflict / Operation	Timeframe	Classical CoG	Real CoG (Multidomain)	Key Lesson
Iraq War	2003–2011	Saddam's regime, SRG	Sectarian cohesion, governance capacity	Regime change without institutions breeds protracted instability.
Nagorno-Karabakh	2020	Frontline combat units	Drones, ISR, networks, Turkish support	Technology and alliances outweigh massed forces.
South China Sea	2010s–present	Naval forces	Lawfare, economic leverage, militia	Strategic narratives and legal claims shape the battlespace early.
Kargil	1999	Occupied heights, infiltrated units	Political will, international diplomacy, air–artillery synergy	Limited wars under the nuclear shadow hinge on resolve, jointness, and narrative control.
Galwan Valley (India–China)	2020	Disputed areas under attack	Political will, logistics, info control	High-altitude contests are decided by endurance and signalling.
Russia–Ukraine War	2022–ongoing	Russian army, Kyiv	Logistics, Western support, information narrative	Sustainment and legitimacy matter more than sheer mass.

Conflict / Operation	Timeframe	Classical CoG	Real CoG (Multidomain)	Key Lesson
Balakot / Pulwama (India–Pak)	2019	Terror groups	Strategic Signalling, escalation management, global diplomacy	Escalation control is central between nuclear neighbours.
Operation Sindoor (India-Pak)	2025	Terror Hubs	C5ISR, cyber/info ops, Kill web	Whole of nation convergence critical for strategic coherence

C5ISR as the Centre of Gravity in the Digital Age

The digital multidomain era redefines what is considered a centre of gravity. C5ISR — Command, Control, Communications, Coordination (integrating domains), Combat Systems, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance- is the core function that ensures operational coherence. Platforms, logistics, networks, and traditional efforts still matter, but they are secondary. Success now depends on who can sense, decide, and act across domains more quickly and cohesively. Turning this reality into plans requires a reliable analytic approach that moves from subsystem mapping to resilience strategies before operational design.

Conceptual Framing

- **C5ISR as the CoG:** View the set of capabilities of C5ISR as the central node, whose integrity ensures coherence. When coherence is maintained, forces synchronise and operate effectively. When coherence breaks down, effects cascade across domains, causing disproportionate paralysis.

- **Lines of Effort vs. the Node**: Everything that improves C5ISR should be seen as supporting lines of effort that contribute to, enable, or balance the node. Targeting the CoG is not about destroying every platform. It involves weakening the ability to observe, decide, communicate, and coordinate the kill chain at all levels.

- **Ethics, Law, and Escalation**: Legal review, ethics, and escalation should be essential to any analytic and operational work. Addressing C5ISR can impact civilian infrastructure, business ecosystems, and other networks. Consider second- and third-order effects from the beginning.

Analytic Method: The Five-Step Pipeline

A structured pipeline converts concept into defensible options. Each step produces artefacts planners can use without crossing into operational tradecraft.

Step 1: Identify Subsystems: Every critical network should be examined not just as a list of assets, but as a dependency chain with analysis of ownership, vulnerability, and resilience. An important factor is its ability to recover within an operationally acceptable timeframe and avoid further degradation.

Step 2: Enumerate Critical Capabilities: List the capabilities that each subsystem provides to coherence, called the **Capability Matrix**. Examples include: continuous fused awareness, assured command reachability, cross-domain tasking, secure identity, latency-bounded manoeuvre orders, and persistent attribution. Prioritise the capability matrix based on contribution to coherence and time sensitivity.

Step 3: List Critical Requirements: Convert capabilities, such as the **Coherence Index,** into measurable requirements and

prioritise them. Cover aspects like technical parameters, human processes, supply chain continuity, legal authorities, and partner-sharing agreements. Examples include identity resolution within X seconds, uninterrupted sensor telemetry, cross-domain tasking permissions, traceable audit logs, and redundant communication paths.

Step 4: Detect Critical Vulnerabilities: Identify gaps between requirements and security posture. Focus on single points of failure, cascading dependencies, commercial chokepoints, trust boundaries, and human decision bottlenecks. Classify vulnerabilities using a **Fragility Index** by type, likely impact on coherence, and plausibility of rapid propagation.

Step 5 Assess Resilience Options: For each critical vulnerability, evaluate resilience levers using the **Recovery Index** across technical, organisational, and policy domains. These may include redundancy, staggered degradation, distributed authorities, immutable audit chains, fallback procedures, and supply chain diversification. Rate each based on time to implement, cost, residual risk, and escalation footprint.

The overall result of this pipeline should be a Coherence Stress Map that visually ranks subsystem vulnerability against recovery timelines. Without this mapping, risk targeting becomes reactive rather than proactively designed.

Targeting Philosophy

These are the guidelines for translating analysis into a targeting philosophy.

- **Target coherence, not platforms**. Aim to induce ambiguity, latency, and mistrust in the adversary's C5ISR. Functional dislocation involves physical, moral, technological,

psychological, and temporal dislocation, which outweighs platform attrition in terms of strategic effect.

- **Layer Effects Across Domains**. Synchronise pressure on sensing, fusion, and decision loops so that degradation compounds. Single-domain pressure rarely causes strategic paralysis.
- **Anticipate and counteract resilience.** Expect defenders to rely on redundancy, distributed authorities, and cross-domain workarounds. Design sequences that restrict or delay those actions.
- **Preserve signalling space**. Maintain plausible deniability of means locally while clearly defining thresholds and redlines at the strategic level to keep de-escalation options available.
- **Manage civilian and allied spillover**. Actions targeting state C5ISR may affect civilian networks or allied systems. Anticipate legal, diplomatic, and mitigation measures at the politico-military level.
- **Exploit the Cognitive Domain.** Degraded coherence causes cognitive gaps. Strategic messaging aligned with physical effects amplifies dislocation and can lead to the rapid collapse of will.

Lesson for India

In the multidomain era, wars are fought with weapons but won in the minds of societies and states. The supporting elements are national morale (political), international legitimacy (diplomacy), war endurance (economic), and narrative dominance (military), which in turn are strategic Centres of Gravity. For India, Galwan and Operation Sindoor highlight that safeguarding the cognitive domain is as important as protecting borders or networks.

The digital age has created new centres of gravity in networks and nodal functions. C5ISR - Command, Control, Communications, Coordination (which integrates domains), Combat Systems, Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance- remains the hub of operational effectiveness. These functions combine sensing, decision-making, and action across domains. Networks, satellite constellations, financial systems, identity platforms, and commercial cloud services support a nation's capacity. Disrupting these can paralyse a state without invading its territory.

For India, redefining the Centre of Gravity is not just an academic inquiry but a crucial aspect of operational readiness shaped by two hostile neighbours, disputed territories, and multidomain threats. Pakistan, employing hybrid threats through proxies, could provoke conflict regardless of its nuclear brinkmanship. China prefers engaging through Pakistan or by conducting periodic intrusions, asserting dominance through technological superiority, military strength, and coercion. Each scenario presents India with a distinct type of CoG challenge. The emphasis on cross-domain joint manoeuvre reflects an understanding that success lies in disrupting interdependencies rather than relying on isolated hubs.

Lessons for India

- DISRUPTION OF NETWORKS AND NODAL FUNCTIONS CAN PARALYSE A STATE EVEN BEFORE A PHYSICAL CONFLICT
- BVR KINETIC AND NON-KINETIC INTEGRATED DOMAIN CAPABILITIES ACHIEVE BETTER EFFECTS – NEW CURRENCY OF POWER
- EXPERIENCE OF GALWAN & OPERATION SINDOOR HIGHLIGHTS THE NEED TO PROTECT COGNITIVE DOMAINS
- STRATEGIC CoG: NATIONAL MORALE, LEGITIMACY, ECONOMIC ENDURANCE, AND STRATEGIC COLLABORATION
- MIL CoG: C5ISR

Joint manoeuvre across domains reflects the understanding that victory lies in collapsing interdependencies rather than chasing singular hubs.

Pakistan: Controlled Instability Under Nuclear Cover

Pakistan's strategic approach embodies asymmetry. Facing India's conventional superiority, it relies on a combination of proxy warfare and nuclear deterrence to offset the imbalance. Its goal is not a decisive conventional victory but to sustain controlled instability below the nuclear threshold. This depends on three interconnected pillars:

- **Nuclear Deterrence as a Brinkmanship Shield**: Pakistan's proxy war strategy depends on lowering the nuclear threshold to prevent India from leveraging its conventional superiority. Pakistan's nuclear stance mainly serves as strategic insulation. It aims to fragment India's escalation calculus while maintaining space for sub-conventional coercion. The contest, therefore, centres on reducing response times without crossing the nuclear threshold.

- **Proxy Terrorism as a State Policy**: Terror groups operating from Pakistani soil serve as the state's strategic tools. These organisations are designed to be resilient, decentralised, ideologically driven, and lethal. Pakistan maintains this system of state-sponsored proxies without descending into internal chaos. The danger arises when the hunter becomes the hunted, and these proxies turn against the state.

- **Information and Diplomatic Manoeuvre**: Pakistan consistently presents itself as a victim of terrorism by India and promotes the false narrative of unrest in Kashmir to internationalise its internal conflicts and Kashmir claim. By doing so, it aims to counter India's narrative advantage.

The core of this architecture is not a single military formation or institution. It is the carefully calibrated balance between proxy violence, nuclear brinkmanship, and narrative positioning. If that

balance remains intact, Pakistan maintains strategic leverage despite conventional asymmetry.

The vulnerability lies in response compression. If India can reduce the time between provocation and calibrated, threshold-controlled retaliation, the risk-benefit balance of proxy warfare shifts. Nuclear signalling becomes less diplomatically effective when escalation is contained through precise, limited, and credible responses. The proxy system becomes less attractive if it consistently results in quick and managed consequences.

Countering Pakistan's approach, therefore, requires more than sporadic punitive strikes. It demands sustained pressure on the interdependencies that enable calibrated instability. International exposure of terror sponsorship, resilient missile defence, credible rapid-response doctrines, and robust strategic communication all help to undermine the systemic balance Pakistan aims to maintain.

The goal is not escalation for its own sake. Instead, it seeks to transform a low-cost, high-benefit strategy into a high-cost, low-benefit one.

China: System Destruction and Grey-Zone Pressure

China presents a significantly different challenge. It has substantial economic strength, military modernisation, and technological capabilities that make its CoG multi-layered. The PLA's doctrine of "*system destruction warfare*" assumes that defeating an adversary means disabling its ability to operate coherently across domains. China's operational design presumes that narrative dominance can sustain deterrence even when physical outcomes remain contested. Thus, information control is vital to its systemic framework. For India, the Chinese CoG appears in four dimensions:

- **Technological and Digital Ecosystem**: China has a competitive edge in integrating C5ISR, cyber, and artificial intelligence into its military. Attacking networks, infiltrating power grids, or spreading disinformation aim to reveal India's vulnerabilities and disrupt its decision-making. Controlling the information space is Beijing's key strength.

- **Border Pressure and Salami Slicing**: The PLA does not engage in full-scale war but maintains persistent pressure across disputed borders, such as in Ladakh. This acts as a form of strategic coercion, aiming to create a problematic situation and blame it on India; then, claiming the territory gained as rightfully Chinese. The CoG is China's ability to sustain consistent coercion without provoking escalation.

- **Economic Leverage**: China uses economic tools as strategic weapons, particularly in its involvement in international supply chains and as a major trading partner. Disruptions in pharmaceutical, electronic, or infrastructure supply chains could weaken India's resilience. The main point is that Beijing can leverage its economic power because of the asymmetry and its influence.

- **Narrative and Legitimacy**: China has been presenting itself as a responsible power and portraying India as unstable in its neighbourhood. Its narratives in international organisations and regional forums support this view.

China's apparent systemic strength also masks structural weaknesses. A system optimised for centralised control performs well in stable conditions but becomes fragile when faced with multiple disruptions across different areas. Over-centralisation reduces flexibility in responding to changes, especially in contested information environments. Centralised decision-making

accelerates action but limits feedback and adaptability. An economic slowdown decreases strategic patience. Dependence on maritime energy sources remains vulnerable to interdiction. The system's focus on maintaining informational dominance means that any disruption can cause internal hesitation. India's strategy must identify these vulnerabilities without copying China's rigidity.

India's comparative advantage may not lie in copying China's structure, but in developing distributed resilience. Adaptive command structures, redundant communication channels, and decentralised decision-making can counteract centralised rigidity. The goal is not symmetrical confrontation but to identify and leverage systemic vulnerabilities while protecting one's own interests.

The Dual Front Challenge

The most complex scenario for India involves coordinated or simultaneous pressure from the west and the north. A proxy attack timed with border coercion could aim to cause strategic hesitation rather than a decisive battlefield defeat. The goal would be to stretch political focus, shorten decision timelines, and create narrative confusion.

In such a scenario, India's CoG is not any single military formation but its ability to sustain political will, maintain economic stability, and preserve societal cohesion under pressure. Fragmentation across these dimensions would achieve what adversaries might struggle to secure through force alone. Credible deterrence will thus lie in maintaining national resilience through political will, military capability, and strategic communication.

Operational and Strategic Recommendations

Reform will encounter institutional resistance. Services focused on platform dominance find it difficult to shift toward system-wide dominance. Budgeting processes emphasise visible acquisitions over unseen integration. Command cultures designed for domain excellence oppose data transparency across areas. Without sustained political leadership that values coherence over symbolism, doctrinal ambitions will exceed implementation capacity.

Redefining the Centre of Gravity as a system of interdependencies is only valuable if it results in a military cultural shift in how India organises, equips, trains, and makes decisions. The challenge is to turn theory into real advantage at the pace of the contest. This requires developing a force and a state capable of seeing quickly, thinking rapidly, deciding promptly, and acting across domains without hindrance from its own systems. The following is a practical roadmap of adaptations India must implement to achieve that change.

National C5ISR Fusion Grid

India's intelligence value chain remains siloed by agency, classification, and habit. Multidomain conflict highlights the disadvantages of such silos. Despite transformation efforts and the NIA, the intelligence system stays reactive and slow. The aim is to develop proactive, pre-emptive, and real-time fused intelligence for action, achieved through a secure cloud-based operational picture that integrates space-based C5ISR, airborne sensors, ground reconnaissance, maritime feeds, cyber telemetry, open-source intelligence, and human intelligence.

- **India requires a unified national fusion system** that integrates military, intelligence, cyber, space, and economic

data into a single operational picture. Gathering data is no longer the main challenge; the key is the speed of interpretation. The entity that reduces the time from detection to decision gains an escalation advantage without firing a single shot. Therefore, C5ISR must evolve from a support role into the central nervous system of national defence. Without this transformation, India risks having advanced sensors and shooters operating faster than its decision-making framework can respond to.

- **Prioritise machine-speed triage**. Invest in AI anomalies, correlations, and pattern breaks, but keep humans central in the loop.
- **Advance fused intelligence.** Provide customised, low-latency feeds to theatre and tactical levels, not only to national users in Delhi.
- **Institutionalise red-teaming within the fusion** process to stress-test assessments and prevent mirror imaging.

Functional Integration Beyond Symbolism

India has debated theatre commands long enough without establishing the core framework of integrating the battlespace through Functional Commands as a prerequisite. The priority, along with desired service capabilities, must be developing functional commands for multidomain integrated effects in the battlespace, dominating the kill chain and decision cycle through a Multi-Domain Command and Control (MDC2) Architecture. This will ensure that the foundation of a mature theatre is built on professionalism, not weakness or political expediency. Until then, India's priority must be clear: integrate the battlespace through functional synergy rather than chasing the illusion of theatre-

isation. In war, substance always beats form, and outcomes at the cutting edge matter most.

The character of modern war no longer centres on controlling territory, aerospace, or maritime frontlines. Instead, it focuses on who can control the battle space, accelerate decision-making cycles, and deliver precision effects faster than the enemy. Creating functional commands that coordinate resources across services for cross-domain effects is crucial. Commands such as Cyber Command, Space Command, C5ISR Command, Cognitive Warfare Command, a Drone Corps, Rocket and Missile Corps, and a dedicated Air Defence Command will likely contribute more to India's security in the upcoming decade than traditional geographic theatre-based strategies.

A Cyber Command should lead offensive and defensive efforts in the digital realm. A Space Command must protect India's satellites and utilise space-based ISR and communications to give forces decision-making superiority. A C5ISR Command must serve as the backbone, connecting every radar, drone, satellite, and sensor into a seamless picture for commanders. A Drone Corps must ensure India does not fight tomorrow's wars with yesterday's tools by creating swarms, kamikaze drones, and loitering munitions at scale. A rocket and missile force must energise each theatre with long-range precision strike capabilities.

A strategic organisation for Cognitive Warfare must prepare India for battles involving perception, narrative, and psychological influence, where victories can be achieved without firing a shot. Additionally, an Air Defence Command must protect the country's skies across all regions in an era where drones, missiles, and hypersonic weapons challenge traditional defence systems and have transformed the landscape of warfare.

Resilient Command and Control

Strategic resilience depends on command-and-control that withstands jamming, spoofing, blanking, and cognitive overload.

- **Migrate to tiered C2 architecture**: resilient national cores, theatre hubs, and mobile edge nodes with mesh networking and automatic path diversity. Assume primary links will be degraded and design for graceful failure.
- **Deploy cross-domain mission architecture** using a Multi-Domain Command and Control (MDC2) framework. Decentralise decision-making to the lowest level with clearly defined commanders' intent and playbooks for time-sensitive objectives.
- **Develop a real-time decision-support system**: geospatial dashboards, wargaming simulations, and courses-of-action evaluators that include escalation ladders, collateral risk, and legal parameters.

Cyber, Space, and Electromagnetic Spectrum as a Triad

Cyber operations, space-based warfare, and electromagnetic spectrum operations cannot be isolated in multidomain warfare. Therefore, the requirement is:

- **Prioritise and reinforce critical functions**. Identifying mission-critical operations in government and industry, securing digital dependencies, and protecting them with resilient architectures, cyber hardening, and backup options.
- **Balance offensive and defensive cyber strategies**. Deterrence depends on the ability to impose targeted,

reversible costs on adversary systems within a specific timeframe, combined with credible resilience.

- **Treat space assets as wartime systems**. Build redundancy with proliferated small satellites, rapid launch options, and protected communications. Train to operate effectively when satellites are degraded.
- **Put EMSO in a strong position**. Routine electronic support, attack, and protection are essential. Invest in adaptive cognitive EW that learns quickly, and combine it with deception and cyber to multiply effects.

Precision Fires and Air Defence that Close the Loop

Precision matters when the sensor-to-shooter kill chain is condensed, credible, and resilient.

- **Develop a sensor–shooter system in each theatre** that allows any validated sensor to quickly cue the most suitable shooter, regardless of service ownership.
- **Optimise loitering munitions, drones/swarms**, and long-range precision fires with effective counter-UAS systems.
- **Develop an integrated air and missile defence system** that combines national and theatre sensors, including civilian resources, with multi-layered and tiered hard and soft-kill capabilities.

Maritime Posture that Turns Geography into Leverage

India's geography provides leverage in the Indian Ocean Region. India's maritime COG is its capacity to secure sea lines of communication and movement through the IOR without relying on capital assets.

- **Andaman and Nicobar Command** should be equipped with additional resources to become a genuine joint force strategic command, featuring maritime domain awareness, long-range strike capabilities, aerial assets, specialised ground forces, distributed logistics, and an amphibious task force.
- **Enhance undersea capability** by expanding SSNs, seabed sensors, autonomous underwater vehicles, and anti-submarine warfare aircraft. Control of the undersea domain can influence the pace above.
- **Use maritime lawfare and information operations** alongside existing efforts to pre-empt grey-zone tactics in the littorals.

Land Warfare Challenges for the High Altitude and the Plains

India's land challenges are twofold: high-altitude attrition and urban or plains complexity.

- **At high altitude, logistics is crucial**. Preposition fuel, ammunition, and winter stocks on a large scale. Border infrastructure and in-situ forces with agile IBG units equipped with light tanks remain essential for both denying and dominating. Use high-altitude UAVs, automated ropeway systems, and hybrid airships where terrain impedes road speed. The deterrence strategy must be credible through denial and domination rather than solely through defence and response.
- **Field light, networked fires, and EW teams** that can dislocate adversary positions without massed formations in oxygen-thin environments.

- **In the plains environment, empower combined-arms teams** equipped with organic breaching, counter-UAS, EW, and C5ISR. Train commanders to operate in vertical spaces and to seamlessly integrate information operations without compromising execution tempo.

Logistics as a Weapon System

Sustainment is the quiet core of stability in a prolonged conflict. Real-time visibility of inventories, maintenance status, and supply chain health across services enhances endurance. Domestic industrial strength in critical technologies decreases vulnerability to external disruption. The focus must be:

- **Create a defence logistics cloud** that monitors inventories, movements, and maintenance health across services and suppliers in real time. Provide field commanders with real-time dashboards.

- **Secure key areas**: energy, semiconductor, rare earth, and advanced material supply chains. Enhance war endurance and stamina with the adequacy of WWR.

- **Predictive maintenance and modular repair** enhance availability. In war, availability is more important than optimal performance.

Whole-of-Nation Resilience

The CoG is not only multidomain but also includes all elements of national power—military, political, diplomatic, and economic. The strategic CoG in multidomain war targets beyond military sites, focusing on war-waging capabilities and a nation's resolve: power grids, digital infrastructure, communication networks, and public perceptions. There is a need for cyber resilience, hygiene, and the prevention of physical disruptions through regular audits

and tests with clear remedial actions. Additionally, resilience in the cognitive domain is essential to counter false narratives and disinformation. An important factor is democratic cohesion and social harmony, which often become targets of an adversary.

Strategic Communications

Narratives shape the notion of victory. This is an area, particularly at the strategic level, where India needs more focus. Strategic communication and narrative influence are essential tools in the 21st century and should be aligned with military operations. There is a need for a Directorate, led by the DG Strat Communication, under the CDS. India's absence in shaping early international narratives creates a gap that adversaries exploit to influence perceptions before facts become clear. Liaison with international media and partners should be formalised to provide early context and manage escalation in the information space. In today's warfare, victory depends on controlling not just the battlefield, but also the pace, the story, and the choices available to your opponent.

Training, PME, and HR Talent

Multidomain operations cannot be fought with single-domain mindsets. Indian PME is one of the most respected models worldwide, having repeatedly demonstrated its effectiveness on the battlefield and in internal security. However, the approach to future PME has become broader in scope, more complex in content, and more abstract in nature at each successive level, requiring reflection and reorientation to address future multidomain challenges.

Traditional principles of war and classical operational art need reassessment in light of modern multidomain conflict. The goal is to evaluate the current PME's effectiveness regarding its purpose,

determine if it responds to the evolving military needs of today and tomorrow, and assess its development areas in the pursuit of professional excellence and mission success.

The armed forces must shift from integration to interdependence and incorporate aspects such as cross-domain effects, escalation management, cyber hygiene, and information operations as core subjects.

Technology Sprints with Real Delivery

Strategy falters without capability, and in modern high-tech wars, technology determines the outcome. Domestic R&D must focus on critical technologies, especially in AI-based systems, counter-UAS, resilient communications, tactical electronic warfare, offensive cyber tools, miniature on-demand satellites, and autonomous kill chains. Broaden the acquisition process to include startups and MSMEs through rapid contracting, test ranges, and sandboxes. Enable start-ups to address specific problems quickly rather than wait for comprehensive, delayed solutions.

Escalation Management

In a nuclearised environment, escalation control is not just a diplomatic afterthought; it shapes operational design from the outset. Carefully calibrated options across military, informational, and diplomatic tools maintain the initiative while preventing adversaries from gaining a narrative advantage.

Instead of viewing the escalation ladder as a straight line during Op Sindoor, India saw it as a modular matrix that employed military, informational, diplomatic, and economic tools simultaneously. This method allowed control over the pace and intensity of operations without resorting to full-scale war. The main idea was to stay ahead and influence the enemy's will and

capabilities at each stage, which became the central feature of the escalation process.

Conclusion

Clausewitz's insight endures because it recognises that war revolves around decisive centres. What has changed is the form of that centre. In the twenty-first century, it is rarely a fortress or a formation. It is the integrity of the system that connects awareness to judgment and judgment to action in service of political purpose.

Modern conflict punishes fragmentation more than weakness. States falter not only when formations are destroyed but also when networks lose alignment, when tempo fractures, and when confidence erodes. The contest is therefore not solely over territory or attrition; it is over systemic integrity under stress.

For India, the challenge is immediate and complex. Two adversaries, different doctrines, an interconnected battlespace. The task is to stay aligned at home while identifying and exploiting seams abroad. Platforms matter. Technology matters. But integration matters most.

The redefined centre of gravity is the architecture of coherence itself. It must be protected vigilantly and targeted precisely. In future wars, the earliest signs of defeat will not necessarily be lost ground. Instead, they will manifest as hesitation, confusion, and narrative drift.

The state that maintains clarity under pressure, makes decisions faster than it is disrupted, and aligns force with purpose without breaking will determine the outcome.

Coherence is no longer just a secondary effect of strength; it is a form of strength.

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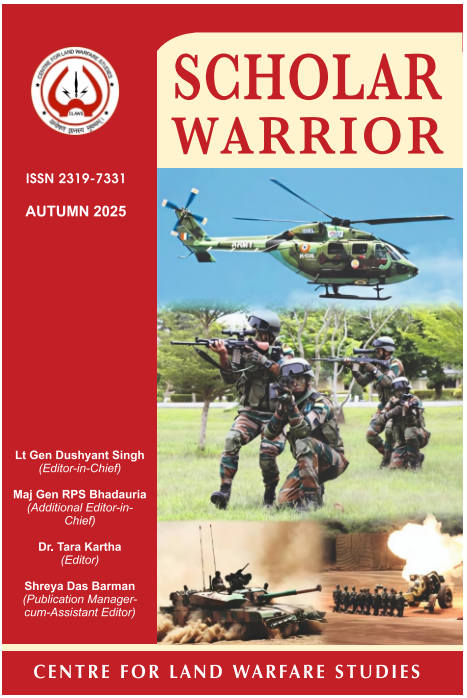

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This paper re-examines the classical idea of the Centre of Gravity in the context of twenty-first-century warfare, where conflict increasingly unfolds across interconnected land, sea, air, cyber, space, and cognitive domains. It argues that in contemporary multidomain operations, decisive advantage no longer rests on the destruction of a single force or geographic objective, but on degrading the integrated networks that sustain an adversary's ability to detect, disrupt, deny, and dominate.

Drawing insights from recent conflicts and applying them to India's strategic environment against Pakistan and China, the paper presents C5ISR as the contemporary hub of operational coherence and the Centre of Gravity. By analysing systemic dependencies, vulnerabilities and resilience, the paper offers a conceptual and grounded framework for understanding how future wars will be fought, deterred, and decided in an increasingly networked battlespace.

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