



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



POLICY BRIEF

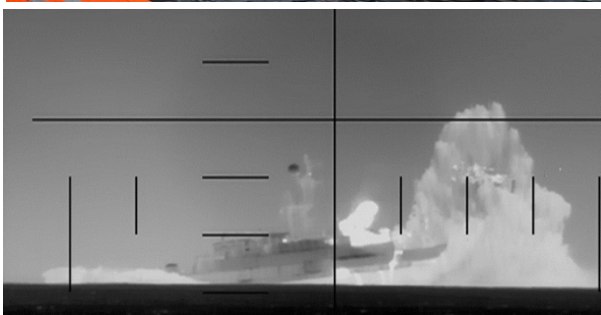
Military Insights from the Ongoing Gulf War

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Cover Images:

An M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) conducting operations against Iran during Operation Epic Fury in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility, March 9, 2026. Source: [Department of War, US](#)

Thai-flagged bulk carrier Mayuree Naree was struck while sailing near the strategic Strait of Hormuz after departing Khalifa Port in the United Arab Emirates on March 11, 2026. Source: [@ThaiEnquirer](#)

On March 4, a US Navy attack submarine, USS Charlotte, sank an Iranian Navy frigate, IRIS Dena, roughly 40 nautical miles off the southern coast of Sri Lanka. Source: [X/@DeptofWar](#)

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Introduction

Three weeks is too short a time to draw conclusive military lessons from any armed conflict. However, the currently raging Gulf war certainly provides insights into the rapidly changing character of contemporary war. It is unfortunate that factual analyses are being swamped by tendentious commentary in cyberspace and media alike. *Much of this is part of the cognitive warfare in which both sides are naturally engaged.* It also reflects the deep polarisation prevalent globally on almost all issues, even amongst compatriots, with stark facts being challenged more out of animosity than reason.

Military realities are being lost sight of amidst these fierce debates on the rationale, morality, and legality of actions. Even more lamentable is the endeavour in some quarters to interpret events for narrow purposes by disparaging the utility of specific military forces. Sowing doubts about the need for boots on the ground, or of the imperative for naval surface warships, by the votaries of air power, could prove catastrophic for any nation which falls prey to the mirage of bloodless victory engineered from the sky.

It may, therefore, be useful to dispassionately underscore what can be clearly inferred from the current hostilities stretching from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Gulf of Oman, a region which includes three of the world's most critical choke points for trade and energy flows.

The 'Asymmetric' Crisis

Perhaps the most significant lesson from the war has been the question of prolonged sustainability of modern air defence. Iran has used waves of mass-produced, low-cost drones, loitering munitions and ballistic missiles to saturate sophisticated defence networks. *Using a four-million dollar Patriot or THAAD interceptor to destroy a drone costing a few thousand dollars is clearly a losing strategy of attrition.* 'Mass' in attack requires 'mass' in defence. Counter-drone technologies and methodologies are likely to gain enormous momentum to address this issue. Already, the US and the Gulf states are pivoting towards drone interceptors to preserve the high-end missile stockpiles for larger ballistic missile threats. Kiev is pitching in with hardware and experience in this emergent form of warfare.

The quick and cheap availability of lethal drones has underlined the absolute criticality of robust and effective air defence networks for all nations. Along with counter-drone weapons, technology itself is likely to provide answers to solve this cost imbalance by introduction of Directed Energy Weapons and other nascent breakthroughs in military technology.

The Indispensability of Multi-Domain and Joint Operations

All post-Covid 19 wars have demonstrated that irrespective of geography, contemporary armed conflict will be simultaneously fought in multiple domains. Military operations will invariably span the land, air, cyber, space and cognitive domains. Where geography demands or permits, the battle space will expand to include the sea and under-sea domains. However, on some occasions, battles will be fought completely in continental air-land scenarios, and on others, far out in the ocean in a totally maritime battle space, devoid of land forces or land-based aircraft.

Again, irrespective of geography, all forces that are available, whether belonging to a single or multiple services, will need to be synergised to undertake joint operations. It is immaterial which service these forces belong to. *Multi-domain operations and joint operations are linked but are conceptually distinct.* To cite the US example, a coordinated ground assault involving the army and the marines is joint, but not multi-domain; whereas anti-submarine warfare involving surface ships, hunter-killer submarines, and naval aircraft is multi-domain, but not joint.

Joint operations require joint operational planning and training, but also a joint force commander. This need not entail a permanently appointed commander operating in a geographically defined theatre. Very often it could be a joint force commander (JFC) selected and appointed for a specific operation in a specific geography, as was indeed the case right through both World Wars in the last century. The jury is still out on the relative merits of both options, in terms of flexibility, negotiating an additional permanent layer of hierarchy, quick decision-making in consonance with the hyper-speed of modern combat, and optimum command and control of joint forces.

The bottom-line inference from the current hostilities in the Gulf is that armies, navies and air forces need to plan and train for joint operations in multiple domains, focusing on compatibility of common equipment and broad understanding of each other's environment, doctrine, and application-of-force methodologies. Clearly, no war can be won by ground forces or naval assets or aerospace power alone.

The Limits of Air Power

The massive aerial bombing of Iran in general, and Tehran in particular, has led to significant degradation of military assets and infrastructure. However, once again, the campaign shows that air power, while devastating in terms of destruction, cannot secure lasting victory. Right from the experience of the London Blitz, through Vietnam and Kosovo, air power alone has been unable to break the enemy's will to fight. Airstrikes sterilise areas, but cannot occupy or govern them, leaving vacuums for adversaries to rebuild.

Aerial bombing results in wastelands, and often in post-campaign anarchy. Conclusive outcomes necessitate integration of ground forces for achieving the political and military objectives. However, in tandem with ground and maritime forces, modern air power is a massive force multiplier for combat, both on land and at sea.

Maritime Confusions and Controversies

It has always been difficult for those not associated with the maritime domain to comprehend its unique characteristics and traits, especially in regard to naval conflict. The sinking of the Iranian warship 'Dena' by a US submarine off Sri Lanka, and the ongoing battle for Hormuz, highlight that the peculiarities of war at sea usually generate controversy in every major conflict.

The Law of the Sea

The principle of the freedom of the seas was first articulated in 1609 by Hugo Grotius and is a basic tenant of international law. Even after UNCLOS, the absolute freedom of the seas (except for 12 nautical miles of territorial waters) remains intact. There is no sovereignty on the high seas and no borders. The maritime commons belong to no nation, no grouping, no commercial entity. There are no laid down 'areas of influence' or 'backyards' in maritime international law, and any such declaration needs to be enforced by naval power, much as a 'blockade' needs to be.

The freedom of the seas for trade and transportation also translates into freedom of the seas for hostilities. When two belligerents go to war on land, all the oceans of the world become an arena of combat for their navies. For example, many of the great naval battles of World War I between England and Germany were fought thousands of miles away from Europe - the pivotal Battle of the Falklands and the Battle of Coronel in 1914 were waged in the East Pacific and South Atlantic, off Chile and Argentina, respectively.

Belligerents are at full liberty to attack each other anywhere on the oceans but need to refrain from attacking neutral shipping, neutral warships and neutral infrastructure. In reality, it all depends on who can do what. For example, the Iranians can attack GCC countries, and they do. If their Navy could sink US ships off Sri Lanka they would. In any hypothetical conflict between India and China, it is not incumbent that naval battles will be restricted only off the coast of India or China.

This is the harsh maritime reality, as well as the legal position. However, humanitarian law and the Geneva Conventions do apply to the degree possible. A submarine is unlikely to surface to rescue survivors from a sunken ship. A warship would usually pick up survivors, but only if it is not itself under attack or threat.

Straits and Choke Points

Navies and warships have been vulnerable to the narrow and shallow waters of straits and choke points since time immemorial, and geography dictates that they will continue to remain so. During hostilities, straits are dangerous for ships of all belligerents. As an example, it may be relatively easy to transit the Straits of Malacca in peacetime, but it would become very difficult indeed for belligerents to navigate the same in wartime – a reality resulting in China's famous 'Malacca Dilemma'. Besides possibly being exposed to fire-power from land at close range, the shallow waters of straits can be mined very effectively, a lesson taught to all navies in the Straits of Dardanelles in 1915.

Ever since that Gallipoli fiasco, warships do not enter mined straits – period. Nor do they venture into straits in which land on either side is in the hands of opposing belligerents. To thereby argue that surface warships are of little use, is akin to calling for disbanding armoured regiments because tanks cannot take part in urban CI operations.

Warships may provide protection to merchant ships through convoys, but this is usually on the high seas, and utility of the same in contested straits is highly debatable. Should any belligerent take the battle to any strait, as Iran has in Hormuz, it poses problems of having to clear the straits of mines for safe passage, which is a laborious undertaking and requires specialised mine sweeping ships and aircraft. It is, of course, illegal for any belligerent to interfere with the freedom of navigation in any international strait, but history is replete with cases where international law has been jettisoned in the pursuit of victory or survival.

Aircraft carriers

The US has deployed two nuclear-powered aircraft carriers to the Gulf region on the way for conducting incessant air attacks from the sea, which they have undertaken round the clock. A third Carrier Strike Group (CSG) is reportedly on the way to the gulf region. There have been unconfirmed reports about strikes on one of these carriers, but in the age of AI and infowars, a clear picture will emerge only after the end of hostilities. The USS Gerald Ford, operating past the end of a stretched operational cycle, has reported a major fire and pulled out to Crete. The enquiry into the same will surely bring out lessons for overstretched navies.

These large warships operate at long distances from land, providing both sea room for conducting air operations, as well as protection from short-range platforms and munitions. Without these ships, the US could not have guaranteed the availability of air power for striking Iran. Operations from the US or bases in UK/Europe, whilst feasible in terms of range, can at best be sporadic and intermittent. American air bases in various Gulf countries are static, and thus far more vulnerable to attack, and all have been struck by Iran. There is also always the possibility that their use could be denied by the host country under changing fortunes of war.

Despite the indispensability of aircraft carriers for projecting air power at long distances from the home coast, their utility is consistently being questioned. This is because of their very high cost which clearly consumes a considerable part of finite defence budgetary pies and impinges on capital acquisition in other areas. Their considerable power and self-protection, as well as the layered defences afforded by the accompanying battle group, is disregarded by vested interests who paint an alarming picture of aircraft carriers as vulnerable white elephants.

Without debating the extent of vulnerability and survivability of aircraft carriers and the carrier battle group, suffice it to say that they are floating airfields which can bring sustained air power to bear anywhere on the planet, without being constrained by sovereign airspace, the availability of air bases, or the good offices of fickle allies. Moreover, the aircraft carrier provides mobile combat airpower deep into the oceans at instant notice, which land based aircraft just cannot do, even if the scene of battle is within range. This capability is vital for sea control in distant waters.

Stockpiling and Logistics

It would be evident that emergent conventional wars of our times will be very intense in the beginning, and an exceptionally large amount of ammunition, drones and other munitions will be consumed in a brief period of time. Stockpiling of these in the required and adequate numbers is absolutely critical, as wars are likely to breakout at

much shorter notice than was earlier the case, when the need for mobilisation would provide some buffer.

Modern munitions are expensive, and simply not available off the shelf from any production source. There is a reluctance to stockpile ammunition because it has an expiry date, and for the sake of safety, expired ordnance must be destroyed if not used. This is seen as wasteful by those appropriating funding, and there has been a tendency to store increasingly limited quantities on account of the expense. An important lesson from this Gulf war, and others preceding it, is that the war wastage reserve must be maintained, and economising on the quantity of ammunition available is extremely hazardous in the current international environment, as this factor could well determine victory or defeat.

Artificial Intelligence

The continuous precision attacks by both sides, and the remarkably effective air defence by the Gulf states, is suggestive of AI being used to accelerate kinetic operations. It is also demonstratively being used to stream an unending barrage of hard-to-discern false information and, of course, for cyber warfare.

AI driven networks are fusing the avalanche of data from satellites, radars, warships, IOT sensors and signals intelligence to detect missile and drone launches, as well as aircraft and ship movements, in near real time, prompting quick defensive or offensive responses by both sides, at a far faster rate than would be possible for traditional human chains.

Autonomous systems, including drones and small boats, are using increasingly more powerful AI systems for precise navigation targeting and coordinating during operations. Most missiles are using AI assisted trajectory corrections that adjust flight paths midcourse to evade interceptors. Conversely, air defence systems increasingly use AI to distinguish between decoys and real threats and to prioritise engagements. Both sides are deploying AI to sift through the huge amount of data being produced by social media to identify patterns, key influencers, and even recommendations for neutralising Information Warfare nodes.

AI generated fake and synthetic content is being used to create false evidence that can be weaponised in media, complicating attribution and raising the risk of misperception-driven escalation. Key personnel and leaders are being impersonated for spreading reassurance or panic, and for influencing morale.

AI may also help in detection of stealth platforms, thereby addressing a major problem for defenders. The alleged 'winging' of a US F-35 aircraft by the Iranians may be indicative of the tussle between stealth and AI.

The impact of artificial intelligence is seen across the board in both kinetic and non-kinetic operations, and it is certain that it will play an increasingly greater role in determining victory or defeat.

Dissemination of Information

As the amount of AI generated deepfakes and false information increases exponentially, it becomes important for the lay public to receive briefings from the highest level possible. Even a short while ago, junior or middle ranking officers conducted media briefings. It is interesting to note that the dissemination of information from the US side is being undertaken live by the Secretary of War in person, in conjunction with the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff. Experience in earlier wars has shown that much information is lost and twisted in translation if routinely conducted by public relations cells. This was also clearly apparent in Operation Sindhoor, and needs attention.

Reaffirmation of the Perennial Nature of War

While the character of war keeps changing, its essential nature does not. The ongoing conflict reaffirms this in many ways. War is brutal, violent and barbaric, marked by dehumanisation, mass suffering and cycles of vengeance that no technology or morality can tame. This was always apparent to soldiers and civilians exposed to the savagery of wars, but needs to be better understood by the teeming millions for whom the entire experience is limited to a reality show on digital screens, and who have the luxury of expressing moral outrage at incidents in this conflict that only reaffirm the perennial nature of war.

Casualties. On just one day in July 1916, the British Army suffered its worst single day human loss with 60,000 casualties and 20,000 killed. In contrast, the total numbers killed in Iran over 3 weeks of extreme bombing has been quoted as approximately 3000 by the Red Crescent and other human rights groups. The numbers killed today are much reduced due to precision targeting and munitions. However, the public reaction to deaths, even in single digits, is indicative of the chasm between the reality of war and public expectations of almost bloodless combat.

Collateral damage. Despite best efforts on the part of militaries, collateral damage will take place in any armed conflict, including casualties and damage to schools, hospitals

and other civilian infrastructure. This is most likely to happen in urban areas where belligerents may use these public facilities as shields for military elements.

Blue on Blue. Again, despite any amount of technology or best intentions, incidents such as the shooting down of three US F-15s by Kuwaiti air defence will always take place in the fog of war, and by human error under conditions of stress, fatigue and fear. Friendly fire will regrettably always take place, as witnessed in some of India's own battles.

Targeting of Leadership. From ancient times, the targeting of kings and generals leading armies into battle has been a time-honoured dictum of warfare, on account of the enormous effect of such loss on the conduct and fortunes of conflict. Alexander and Napoleon were surrounded by their imperial guards, and generals in both World Wars directed the flow of battle from extremely well defended and fortified headquarters, well in the rear of the frontlines. Similarly, flagships have targeted the elimination of the apex leadership, much as Nelson's HMS Victory was in the famous battle of Trafalgar, in which he himself lost his life. In modern parlance, the words 'assassination' and 'decapitation' are being used and are generating much debate on morality and so on. Suffice to say, the nature of war will always see adversaries trying to slay the opposing leadership by assassination, firepower, sabotage or any other means.

Conclusion

Conventional wars are becoming easy to start, and weapons of attack are becoming cheaper to produce. Armed conflicts may, therefore, begin quickly on account of outrage, miscalculation, hubris, brinkmanship, preemption, or even entirely subjective "preventative" considerations. Nations which face difficult neighbourhoods and adversarial environments need to always focus on deterrence and military preparedness.

There is no getting away from the rapid pace of technology and its use in offensive and defensive systems. Innovative research and discoveries will not be shared by even the closest allies, or through commercial contracts. Those nations which do not develop a vibrant ecosystem for research and development, across both public and private sectors, will only be disadvantaged and endangered.

War will no longer cause death and injury only to those fighting on the frontlines and the civilian populations along territorial borders. Urban centres and the hinterland can now be easily targeted not only from across the border, but also from the sea. As an example, the Indian peninsula, with all its centres of technology and industry, can be attacked from ships and submarines legally operating deep on the high seas.

Pertinent micro-lessons from this Gulf war will doubtless emerge after the dust has settled, and it would be in order to dispassionately examine these for future application in terms of weaponry, organisation and force mix.

Successful prosecution of war and effective defence of the country now also necessitates an effective political-military interface, and a 'whole of nation' approach, to wage combat in multiple domains and at hyper speed. There is no alternative and no time to lose.



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