

Sovereignty of Territory and Beyond

A Fresh Perspective

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The territory is often viewed as the ultimate object of national security. Centralising it to drive military thinking and its ensuing concepts and capabilities could actually prove counterproductive to the very foundation of the object of 'National Security'. There is a need to view national security through a wider and deeper prism, and appreciate it beyond traditional geographical markers. A rational and more comprehensive perspective of 'Territory' through the prism of Political Object [not the objective], Strategy, and Character of Modern Battlefield could provide an alternative and progressive approach. The political object in the Indian context, 'to uphold and protect the sovereignty, unity and integrity of India' extracted from Article 51A of the Constitution of India reflects a more open and a domain agnostic tenor. Similarly, the nature of strategy and contours of modern battlefield when examined holistically indicate an all-domain character and induce a need for more comprehensive involvement of relatively ubiquitous domains such as the Air, Space, and Information. Therefore, to prevail in the evolving security environment, a fundamental shift in thought that drives 'Military to focus on an all-domain sovereignty and integrity that is more comprehensive, and guarantees a credible defence of the country' emerges as the ultimate imperative.

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'Ubiquitous the Instrument of Power & Multi-Dimensional the Thought, Credible would be the Defence.'

The concept of 'Territory' in human conscious incubated around 10,000 years ago, when human beings were first domesticated by wheat. Since then, its near centrality in most conflicts has been undebatable. As a consequence, throughout most of the history of human conflict, soldiers invariably dominated higher command of defence forces. Closing in and occupation of territory was a necessary condition towards achievement of military objectives and theory and warfare reasonably concentrated on the armies.¹ The territory may be or is the ultimate object of national security. However, centralising it to drive military thinking and its ensuing concepts and capabilities could actually prove counterproductive to the very foundation of its object, 'National Security'. Hence, there is a serious necessity to view national security through the contemporary character of war and appreciate it beyond traditional geographical markers to develop a thorough military thinking that is future-oriented.

It would be even appropriate to juxtapose our most accomplished strategic thinker, Kautilya, who stated that, 'seizing land from those fighting from low grounds/ ditches rather than from those fighting from heights is much easier.'² In contemporary conditions, Kautilya would have definitely extrapolated this thought beyond the centrality of territory. He would have been the first one to imagine and exploit the unique potential of all domains (especially the more permeable and flexible domains of air, space, and information) to develop an indomitable military strategy. Hence, with this hypothetical supposition, *this article endeavours to establish and foster a rational perspective of 'Territory' within the rubric of military instrument of power through the prism of Political Object [not the objective], Strategy, and Character of Modern Battlefield.*

To elaborate this perspective, this article will first dwell on the aspects of Political Object while referring to the Constitution and some notable military conflicts. Dissecting strategy would be the next logical step to understand where does territory fit within the overall construct of strategy. In this section, the article would mainly refer to the 'Fifth-Generation Strategy' articulated by Alan Stephens, an eminent air power thinker. The final segment will present a brief assessment of the character of contemporary and future battlefield to further emphasise on the dangers of 'overlooking the obvious realities'. This article will conclude with certain recommendations that summarise the entire argument. Finally, it may be noted that this article

attempts to nurture a fundamental shift in thought that drives ‘Military to focus on *an all-domain sovereignty and integrity* that is more comprehensive, and guarantees a credible defence of the country.’ It is anticipated that asking the right questions on this subject will definitely expand the horizons and manifest in a true all-domain and future oriented military thought.

POLITICAL OBJECT: DEVELOPING A RATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

Clausewitz was most direct in defining the role of political object in war, where he explicitly stated that, ‘The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and the means can never be considered in isolation from the purpose.’³ It is important to understand the subtle difference between ‘Object’ and ‘Objective’, where the object is the ultimate purpose or end state of war and objectives are various goals to be pursued towards that object. While there has always been a tendency to attach political object to a ‘Piece of Land’, an alternative thinking on the subject always existed.

The alternative thinking has become even more pertinent in next generation military strategy, where Alan Stephens in his concept of ‘Fifth Generation Strategy’ clearly detaches political object from territory stating that, ‘During the past seven decades (beyond 1950s), it has become increasingly evident that war is now concerned more with the political outcomes than with seizing and holding ground, just as it has become evident that air power has constantly expanded its influence, even control events in all three environments.’⁴ It will be even more edifying, once this concept of political object is viewed through the prism of Article 51A of the Indian Constitution.

It is the same article that is often cited as the basis for defining ‘National Interests’ and/ or ‘National Defence/Military Objectives’. Para (c) & Para (d) of Article 51(A) clearly state that it is the duty of every citizen of India ‘*to uphold and protect the sovereignty, unity and integrity of India*’ and ‘*to defend the country*’ respectively.⁵ Interestingly, the word ‘Territory’ does not find a mention here. However, the same can only be inferred indirectly from ‘*preserving the sovereignty, integrity, and ensuring defence of the country*’ as stated otherwise. Hence, these words [in italics] should be central to our ultimate political object, particularly to cultivate right military thinking and a competitive strategy to defend our country.

This viewpoint can be further elucidated while referring to H. Von Moltke who echoed Clausewitz and stated, ‘Victory through the application of armed forces is the decisive factor in war ... it is not the occupation of a

slice of territory or the capture of fortress but the destruction of the enemy forces which will decide the outcome of the war. This destruction, thus constitutes the principal object of operations.⁶ He further emphasises the point of de-hyphenating from fixed objects like territory that, ‘in war, it is less important what one does than how one does.’⁷ Similarly, a more holistic explanation of the political object is presented by noted author on military strategy, B.H. Liddell Hart who states that, ‘the term objective, although common usage has a physical and geographical dimension—and thus tends to confuse the thought.’⁸ As a better alternative, he states that, ‘Rather, it would be better to speak of “the object” and that in war is better state of peace that one desires, and that applies to both aggressor nations who seek expansion and to peaceful nations who fight for preservation.’⁹ Once again, the central theme is to develop the true understanding of the role of war in conducting foreign affairs, and that if fixated on ‘Territory as Central Tenet’, it may prove regressive and counter-productive.

There are number of historical illustrations that clearly highlight the divergence of Political Object from Territory, thereby demonstrating holistic understanding of effective use of the instrument of military. It would be good to start with the Indian examples: (1) The political object of 1988 Maldives coup d’état was to defeat it and accordingly joint operations were designed to achieve that [and not the occupation of territory]. (2) The cross-border air strike in Balakot in 2019 was aimed at resolute strategic messaging towards larger end state of ‘Punitive Deterrence’, and it achieved the same.¹⁰ (3) Even if a holistic view of India’ campaign in 1971 is taken, the ultimate political object was *preservation of sovereignty and integrity that was severely vulnerable to situation in East Pakistan*. Accordingly, once that was affirmed, military end state was realised, despite a resounding victory the existing boundaries were retained and occupied territories in the western sector were vacated.¹¹ *This further highlights the non-enduring nature of conquered territory, especially in Indian context.* (4) The daring air raid by Israel on Iraq’s Osirak nuclear reactor stopped the Iraqi nuclear weapon programme in its tracks, thereby maintaining a balance between nations in West Asia. It was a strategic masterstroke and served the political object, and was nowhere linked to territory.¹² (5) Another interesting illustration emerges from NATO’s Operation Allied Force in Kosovo in 1998, where land forces were not even used, and capitulation of adversary achieved with 78 days of air campaign.¹³ Once again Political Object was absolutely clear: ‘the capitulation of leadership’ and the military resorted to non-traditional yet effective methods to achieve the same. (6) The most important illustration is the watershed

event of the 1991 Gulf War that provides one of the best pieces of evidence of the perfect union of political object and military strategy. In this war, the ultimate political object was the 'Freedom of Kuwait from Iraqi Forces', yet the land forces operated within the decisive umbrella of air power to achieve it in the fastest possible manner and with minimum attrition. These examples cover a reasonable spectrum of conflict and adequately illustrate that *a rational and comprehensive understanding of political object mostly leads to a successful military strategy*. The next segment thus gradually moves down to the realm of strategy and will attempt to assess place of 'territory' within the same.

STRATEGY: THE TRUE MANIFESTATION OF POLITICAL OBJECT

According to Clausewitz, 'the strategic elements that affect the use of engagements may be classified into various types: *moral*—that covers intellectual qualities & influences; *physical*—that consists of size, composition, and armament of armed forces; *mathematical*—angles of lines of operations, the convergent and divergent movements; *geographical*—influence of terrain [or may be the three dimensional space as a whole]; and finally *statistical*—that covers support and maintenance.'¹⁴ It is absolutely clear that 'Territory' explicitly finds a mentions in the third element and implicitly in the fourth one, especially once the outward and upward expansion of the same (air, space, and information) is considered.

He further states that it would be disastrous to develop the understanding of strategy by analysing these elements in isolation and one must examine these as a whole,¹⁵ thus clearly advocating against the centrality or primacy of any one of these. Even as an antithesis of Clausewitzian thought, John Warden in *Smart Strategy, Smart Airpower* emphasises that 'the concept of winning wars without fighting was one of the cornerstones of the foreign policy of the Roman Empire',¹⁶ and thus a strategy enabling victory without fighting is an ultimate maxim.¹⁷ This is achievable only if the strategy is seen as a whole and primacy of the any of the elements discussed above is precluded. Hence, at both the ends of strategic thought, territory could be one of the main elements of strategy. However, it is not the only element and more importantly excessive importance to it in conduct of war could prove detrimental.

While applying this argument to contemporary realms with historical oversights, Alan Stephens reduces the contemporary fifth generation strategy of warfare to practical terms and states its characteristics as, 'high

tempo, decision making contest, knowledge dominance, strategic paralysis, operational manoeuvre, fleeing footprint, effect-based operations, no-fly zone, and the rapid halt.¹⁸ It is difficult to discern 'place of territory' within this construct. Moreover, Alan further elucidates the strategic paralysis that, 'speed of decision making, manoeuvre, and force application are of superseding importance, ignoring "lesser target" that lie between attacking forces and the enemy and attacking true centres of gravity—colloquially referred to as parallel or concurrent warfare [is the key]; thus precipitating *strategic collapse*.'¹⁹

This strategy truly transcended the orthodox geographical stalemates as well as blindness, and 'some analysts even believe that prototype of this model were evident during the predominant air power phases of the 1991 and 2003 Gulf War, Bosnia (1995), Kosovo (1999), and Afghanistan (2001–02).'²⁰ Similarly, Israeli Defence Forces while being numerically inferior and geographically vulnerable, applied the tenets of this strategy in 1967 and 1973 so smartly, that these wars are considered as an inflection point of modern-day conflict²¹ and their study is a must in Professional Military Education.

To elaborate further, two noteworthy models of this type of strategic approach was operational manoeuvre developed by Gen Robert Scales, US Army (Retd), and the halt phase or rapid halt strategy and its subset, the no-fly zone, developed by US Air Force.²² Interestingly, in the Scale's combined arms methodology, 'Armies would not need to occupy key terrain or confront the mass of enemy directly. Implicit in his concept was the judgement that in many circumstances it would be preferable either to *destroy enemy's assets or to strike briefly but decisively against one vital point*, rather than routinely try to occupy and seize the enemy territory.'²³

This strategy was further augmented with a proposal of the USAF variation to this model, 'first, halt the enemy advance rapidly (with air power); second, punish the enemy's warfighting resources rapidly (with air power); and third, having seized the initiative, chose any one of the options such as attack enemy leadership, build up one's own forces, pursue a diplomatic end state, impose sanctions or do nothing.'²⁴ While this strategy ensured that the allied forces achieve the objectives, but it also enabled them to effectively control about one-third of the Iraqi landmass.²⁵

A domain agnostic approach and an equitable role of airpower is central to this strategy and interestingly the same was demonstrated even during WWII. B.H. Liddell Hart clearly illustrates that, 'In the series of swift German conquest, the air forces combined with the mechanised elements of the land forces in producing paralysis and moral disintegration of the opposing forces

and of the nations behind. Its effect was terrific and must be reckoned fully as important as that of the Panzer forces. The two are inseparable in any valuation of the elements that created the new style of lightening warfare—the *blitzkrieg*.²⁶ He advocates this aspect as an even greater contribution of the British and American Air forces towards the success of allied armies and navies.²⁷ A statistical assessment that conducted a quantitative test to assess correlation of control of air and battlefield outcomes between 1932 and 2003, clearly revealed that approximately 79 per cent of decisive battles had air superiority.²⁸ It clearly infers that the most precious thing (control of air) that territorial (land and maritime) domains need does not reside fundamentally in those domains.²⁹ Hence, this type of strategy that nearly was multi-domain, was not territory-centric and visualised war as a holistic construct, had been crafted in the past and was successful in the achievement of stated Political Object.

Moreover, it is pertinent to note that the success of this strategy is predicated on its precise understanding. A misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the same could prove otherwise, as was evident during NATO's initial air campaign against Milosevic in 1999. Here, more and more targets were addressed regardless of their relevance to any ends-ways-means construct, let alone Warden's hierarchy of strategic importance.³⁰ It was only after the fundamental principle of this strategy were indeed followed that the campaign began to generate desired effects.³¹ Hence, it is cautioned that an incomplete comprehension of this strategy will not accrue desired outcomes and as a consequence tempt us to bring back the primacy of territory within the realms of Political Object and Strategy, thus, causing a regression. Moreover, the perspective of territory in military thinking will not be complete without examining the same through the final element of this rubric—the character of modern battlefield.

MODERN BATTLEFIELD: DEVOID OF TANGIBLES

The character of the modern battlefield is defined by speed, mobility, sharp decision-making, and technology, seldom seen before. General Robert Scales of US Army acknowledged these realities and necessities and proposed an 'operational concept of highly mobile land forces defined by speed, precision, knowledge dominance, and a fleeting footprint.'³² Interestingly, 'He wanted armies to replicate the characteristics of advanced airpower.'³³ While further elaborating the grand and progressive ideas of General Scales, Alan Stephens in his *Fifth Generation Strategy* states that,

‘The most useful soldiers under Scale construct would be those capable of exploiting information derived from airborne Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR), including AEW&C, UAVs, SIGINT platforms, and satellites, and of then leveraging the flexibility and precise stand-off firepower of strike/ fighters, long range missiles launched from surface platforms, UCAVs, gunships, attack helicopters, and loitering munitions.’³⁴ No author was so comprehensive and a military thinker so forward looking in defining a modern battlefield as well as its imperatives in as much clarity. More importantly, character of such a battlefield is evidently multi-domain and no-where portrays a predominance of territory, and that too from the exposition of an Army General.

In the similar description, *Joint Vision 2010* of the US Defence policy condensed the tenets of postmodern warfare that were inspired by John Boyd’s work. These stated that, ‘By 2010, instead of relying on massed forces and sequential operations, we will achieve massed effects in other ways. Information superiority & advances in technology will enable us to achieve desired effects through the tailored application of joint combat power...with precision targeting and longer-range systems, commanders can achieve the necessary destruction or suppression of enemy forces with fewer systems, *thereby reducing the need for time consuming and risky massing of people and equipment.* Improved command and control, based on fused, all-source real-time intelligence will reduce the need to assemble manoeuvre formations days and hours in advance of attacks. *Providing improved targeting information directly to the most effective weapon system will potentially reduce the traditional force requirements at the point of main effort. All of this suggest that we will be increasingly able to accomplish the effects of mass-the necessary concentration of combat power at the decisive time and place-with less need to mass forces physically than in past.*’³⁵

The contemporary battlefield and future transmutations of the same are an upgraded version of this vision that will see the primacy of Network Centric Operations, unique and seamless combination of manned-unmanned systems, and an increasing application of disruptive technology like the 5G/ 6G, AI, Big Data Analytics, and Quantum computing. The lethality will expand in both kinetic and non-kinetic domains evenly. Finally, unprecedented military developments in the space, cyber, and information domain will completely transform the battlefield in the future. Thus, it is reasonable to deduce that in the modern battlefield, much beyond the established perception of territory based threat, inviolability of sovereignty and integrity across all domains is the central security threat.

These developments are also reflected in the emerging trends in the fundamental structure and thinking of most of the modern militaries. To cite a few illustrations, most of the modern forces have right sized their forces to meet the demands of modern battlefields. In the US armed forces, the US Army constitutes 28 per cent, the US Navy, the US Air Force, and the US Space Force at approximately 20 per cent each, and the US Marine Corps at approximately 10 per cent.³⁶ The trends in the People's Liberation Army exhibit similar approach, where the proportion of PLA Ground Force has come down to 60 per cent, and that of PLAAF and PLAN has increased to approximately 25 per cent and 15 per cent respectively (proportion within these three services only—not considering PLARF and PLASSF).³⁷ Even when examining the defence budget expenditure, a significant amount that is close to 3–3.5 per cent of total defence budget, for both the US and PRC is dedicated to research and development,³⁸ indicating a technology-centric approach to prevail in modern battlefield. Within the US DoD budget, the amount of budget for Research, Development, Testing, and Evaluation is close to US\$ 110 Bn,³⁹ which further substantiates the leading role of technology and technology-centric domains in modern battlefield. The same is also reflected in the US House of Armed Services Committee (HASC) report on Pentagon's preparation for the future wars where, four out of five key recommendations largely emphasise on need to develop air domain and long range strike capabilities to counter the adversaries effectively.⁴⁰ The latest and most authentic evidence is from the Russia–Ukraine conflict that further substantiates this trend is the 'request from President Zelensky for modern fighters like the F-16, F-35, Rafale, & Typhoon from the West, as well as an unprecedented application of aerospace assets for persistent battlefield transparency. Most of the analysts citing these as ultimate military capabilities (strategic & real air power tools for the control of air) as the possible reason for the reluctance of West to share these with Ukraine.'⁴¹ These trends clearly highlight that the greater emphasis of most of the modern armed forces is to progress towards a balanced, all-domain, and future-oriented force capability while de-hyphenating from a territory centric approach to capability development.

THE WAY AHEAD

Article 51 A of the Constitution of India expects us 'to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of enquiry and reforms;' and 'to strive for excellence in every sphere of individual activity so that the nation constantly

rises to higher levels of endeavour and achievement.⁷⁴² It is ironical that these important and visionary guidelines/directions are rarely publicised in the spheres of national security, despite these being few of the most important ones. Accordingly, this article was intended, thought, and crafted on the fundamentals of these paras of Article 51 A. Through the course of deliberations, it became clear that all the three key elements of national security and conflict, that is, political object, strategy, and character of battlefield are not premised on 'territory' exclusively, at least in the modern and envisaged future forms of warfare. Nonetheless, this article absolutely recognises the paramount importance of 'territory' within the overall construct of a Nation-State. Thus, it strongly proposes a dynamic and advanced military thinking to protect it efficiently as well as proficiently. Towards that following summations merit consideration:

1. Military thought must be comprehensive, and focus on all-domain sovereignty and integrity that captures the true spirit of the Constitution, thus guaranteeing credible defence of the country. With the national interests and contours of military operations expanding well beyond traditional geographical markers, it is imperative to appreciate and gainfully harness the potential of all domains, be it land, maritime, air, space, cyber, and information and prevail over our adversaries.
2. Preclude 'Turf Wars' while doing so, as the ultimate object is 'National Security'. 'National Security' must be premised on the protection of sovereignty and integrity across all domains. It must be appreciated that credible capability in air, space, or information domain espouses equal if not greater potential to create vital effects across all the domains and in any kind of conflict situation.
3. Foster institutional attitude that encourages open and full debate, and which rewards intellectual initiatives because then only the parochial thoughts would be overcome, and a constructive reformation will take place. Towards (2) and (3), certain compelling questions as articulated by Air Marshal D. Choudhury in 'Security Vision 2047: A hundred Years since Independence' that need serious deliberation are, 'Is it possible to secure India from the land and sea militarily without securing the air? In today's day and age, are land and sea strategies operationally viable especially in the Indian context with adversaries with strong air forces? Are the Indian air spaces over the mainland and its Island territories not equally a matter of its national sovereignty?'⁷⁴³
4. This article was explicit in highlighting the importance of air power (aerospace power now) through factual and stated accounts of famous

historian and military thinkers. Hence, it is time that we take serious cognisance of the trends of the modern armed forces of the world (including our adversaries) and take a progressive view of this domain and foster its rightful (and necessary) growth.

5. Finally, the outcome of conflicts in future will depend on the ability to employ aerospace and information domain towards shaping and leading the battlefield, ability to synergise the effort across domains, and the ability to execute the operations at the highest possible tempo.

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NOTES

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