

# PRINCIPLES OF WAR DO THEY REQUIRE A RETHINK?

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One often gets to hear the ironical statement that nothing is constant other than change. Time moves on, bringing changes in our daily life, in the global environment and in everything that affects us. With these changing situations, one needs to review one's thought process and action plans to deal with the changed scenario. At times, the required change may be radical and, in some cases, not so revolutionary. Based on this reasoning, one wonders whether the age-old principles of war require a rethink. Should they not be altered to meet the changed scenario more effectively? Aren't they rather archaic and irrelevant for the conduct of modern high-tech wars?

Before we give a rethink, let us first see what we mean by these principles of war. One of the simplest definitions of these principles of war is that they are the basic principles of combat in order to obtain victory. They could also be called the rules for victory. They may also be defined as the fundamental truths governing the prosecution of strategy and tactics. They are theories and are derived from many military histories. War is a clash of opposing wills, a struggle between beliefs, and victory goes to the party that crushes the enemy's will and destroys his beliefs. Warfare, thus, is a struggle for victory, using "power" to cause the opponent's will to yield and own will to prevail. These principles of war lay down the broad guidelines for achievement of victory. In other words, the principles of war are theories formed dialectically from accumulated reasoning and corroborative evidence. If that be so, then it implies that they are

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continually evolving with the passage of time and cannot be described as unchanging for all times to come.

In order to apply these principles successfully, one has to have an indepth knowledge of military history, understand how they have been evolved, grasp their essence, understand the current situation in which they need to be applied and only then will one be able to take correct decisions.

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with a view to improving or reconstituting them. Through philosophy comes “doctrine” which comprises fundamental ideas by which military forces guide their actions in support of laid down national objectives. Doctrines are the guiding principles and basic rules for action that should be taken to embody and carry out national defence policies. The dictionary defines doctrine as a particular principle or position which is taught or advocated by an organisation – a sort of company policy. By its very nature, doctrine, though authoritative, requires judgement in its application. Doctrine deals in ideas while philosophy deals in fundamental

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At times, people tend to get confused with words like “principles”, “doctrine”, “philosophy”, “strategy,” etc. It would, therefore, be proper to understand the subtle differences in their meaning before we get on with our discussion on principles of war. “Philosophy”, as defined in the dictionary, is the critical study of basic principles and concepts of a particular branch of knowledge, especially

principles and concepts. Both are subject to changes with the changing prevalent environment, technological innovations, things like the revolution in military affairs (RMA), etc; however, philosophy, by virtue of its very basic and time proven nature, is less subject to changes than doctrine.

In contrast to both philosophy and doctrine, “strategy” is the operational science or art of

combining and employing the means of war in planning and directing its conduct. "Tactics" is further defined as the art by which fighting elements translate potential combat power into victorious battles and engagements. In comparison to all these definitions stated above, the principles of war, as defined earlier, are tenets which, if applied correctly, will give better probability of success. They suggest how to prosecute strategy and tactics. Principles of war are more general and their application is universal and neither is it binding.

Wars are fought with the use of combat power but it is not necessary that victory will go to the side which has greater combat power. It is not combat power alone that matters but, more importantly, its correct application will decide the result. Principles of war, by and large, focus on this aspect of power application. Combat power is divided into intangible factors and tangible factors. The intangible factors are the mental and bodily capabilities of the individuals and groups that comprise the military forces, the most important one being the spiritual strength of the forces. In other words, these factors include quality of command and control, state of discipline (troop morale), fighting spirit, quality of training, *esprit de corps*, spirit of teamwork, etc which cannot be easily quantified. The tangible factors are strength of military personnel, quantity and quality of material, quantities of various weapons, destructive power, tactical mobility and other physical strengths. The principles of war concern both the tangible and the intangible aspects of combat power.

The principles of war articulated by the young Prussian officer Carl von Clausewitz date back to nearly two centuries and find their roots in the Napoleonic wars. Generally, most of the principles of war articulated by him are related to conventional warfare, the way it existed during his times. In today's context, the possibility of a conventional war between nations is fast receding. Conventional warfare has today been replaced by all encompassing asymmetric warfare, also called unconventional warfare or indirect warfare and that too with the backdrop of the threat of nuclear, biological, chemical (NBC) and weapons of mass destruction (WMD), particularly in our context.

Despite this change in the texture of warfare, these principles of war, though old, are still considered by some to be the fundamental truths governing the

philosophy, doctrine, strategy and tactics of war. They are still considered valid in formulating the doctrine at the highest level, designing the strategy at the theatre level and executing the tactics at the battlefield level. It is claimed and also proven in various wars that adherence to these principles guarantees a higher probability of success as compared to situations in which they are disregarded.

Some say that Clausewitz had propagated mainly five principles, namely, objective, offensive, concentration, economy of force and mobility plus three “elements,” namely, surprise, morale and exploitation. They feel that the essence conveyed in these principles of war is immutable and that the principles which were so true in the age of the sword and arrow are equally true in the age of missiles and precision guided weapons. They argue that with the changing times, the methods of application of these principles might have changed but the soul and spirit behind them is immortal. They insist that this spirit is independent of times, arms employed, types of wars and even of places. The great naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan supposedly belonged to this school.

Then there are others, and probably in the majority, who feel that these stated principles of war not only need to be changed but also the essence and spirit behind them needs to be reviewed. They feel that these principles of war were given to us by the past experts based on their history and their experiences of the past wars. We need to recast them based on the lessons of our past, present and their applicability in the future and pass them on to the next generation who can then modify them as per their experiences. Some of the reasons put forward by them which necessitate this rethink are:

- Change in the texture of war.
- Dissolution and blurring of borders of conflict.
- Diffused arena of conflict, with the enemy seeking cover and concealment in cities amongst the civilian population.
- Emergence of non-state actors.
- Proliferation of WMDs.
- NBC environment.
- Weaponisation of space.

- Energy crises.
- Combating terrorism.
- Peace-keeping operations.
- And so on.

Wars can now be divided into two distinct types viz. conventional and unconventional. They can further be classified as those with and those without the backdrop of NBC and WMD threat. One could also have a complex scenario wherein both these types of wars are being fought simultaneously. The relevant question, therefore, is that if there are two distinct types of wars then, is there a need to have distinctly separate principles of war for them?. Perhaps we need to. We not only need to give a rethink to the principles narrated by Clausewitz but also need to carefully and with proper deliberations, enumerate separate relevant principles of war for unconventional or as it is also called, asymmetric war.

As we review and rethink about these principles of war in the succeeding paragraphs, we may realise that we need to retain some of them, transform a few of them, delete a couple of them and perhaps add some new ones. There are somewhat different versions of the principles of war, from country to country and between various theoreticians, but, generally speaking, there is little practical difference between the versions. The Americans have officially accepted nine principles of war which they teach to cadets at West Point.

An article on the Internet on this subject states that the nine principles of war as currently included in the US doctrine are as follows:

1. **Objective:** Direct every military operation toward a clearly defined, decisive and obtainable objective. Clearly defining an achievable end state remains critical to successful military operations. The proper objective ("purpose") in

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battle is the destruction of the enemy's combat forces. To do this, however, subordinate commanders must be given "terrain objectives" toward which they move.

2. **Offensive:** Seize, retain and exploit the initiative. A military force cannot expect to win a war by taking the defensive. Success comes to those who aggressively move forward, catching the enemy off-guard to force it to surrender or terminate his resistance.
3. **Mass:** Mass the effects of overwhelming combat power at the decisive place and time. Mass in this sense does not mean "more men." "Military superiority" can be attained against a numerically superior enemy if you have superiority in such things as weapons, leadership, morale, and training. "Mass" is generally gained by "manoeuvre."
4. **Economy of Force:** Employ all combat power available in the most effective way possible by allocating minimum power to secondary efforts. This is a somewhat misleading term. It does not mean "do the job with minimum combat power." The principle pertains to "secondary efforts" and implies that don't fritter away power in tackling them, instead use it to achieve superiority at places where it matters.
5. **Unity of Command:** For every objective, seek unity of command and unity of effort. It means that all forces are placed under one commander. The commander has authority to direct all the forces to one purpose. The idea is to ensure optimal cooperation between the many commanders of all the various units and branches, which may have different views of the situation, different tactics and doctrines. This obviously results in better cooperation between the units under his command.
6. **Security:** Never permit the enemy to acquire unexpected advantage. Security entails reducing vulnerability to hostile acts, influence or surprise.
7. **Surprise:** Strike the enemy at a time or place or in a manner for which it is not prepared. The idea is to use secrecy, speed, and deception to achieve the objective in a way that the enemy will be unable to efficiently resist. The effectiveness of the surprise attack is, firstly, destruction of the enemy's intangible combat power through spiritual impact, that is, aiming at

confusion of command, lowered morale, etc; and, secondly, through swift strike, making difficult the application of the enemy's tangible combat power viz personnel, weapons, etc.

8. **Simplicity:** Prepare clear, simple orders and plans to ensure common understanding. Since battle is so complex and unpredictable, complex plans almost always fail. To succeed, a battle plan must be simple. Simple to understand, simple to execute and simple to adapt to changes.
9. **Manoeuvre:** Place the enemy in a position of disadvantage through the flexible application of combat power. Move your forces before and during battle in such a way so as to produce local superiority which is often a key for victory.

The UK armed forces have ten principles included in their doctrine. Most of them are common with those of the US but perhaps differently worded. The ten principles are:

1. **Selection and Maintenance of the Aim:** The aim remains the cardinal principle of war. It is essential to define the aim clearly.
2. **Offensive Action:** It is the chief means open to a commander to influence the outcome of a campaign or a battle.
3. **Concentration of Force:** Military success will normally result from the concentration of force, at the decisive time and place. The 4F principles in combat power application are find, fix, fight and finish. Concentration of force is the assembling of as much as possible of one's combat power and its integrated application at critical times and places.
4. **Economy of Effort:** Decisive strength is to be concentrated at the critical time and place and there must be no expenditure of effort where it does not affect the issue.
5. **Flexibility:** The commander must be able to make decisions on the basis of situations which cannot be foreseen. A balanced reserve is needed for tactical or operational flexibility.
6. **Security:** A degree of security by physical protection and denial of information detail is essential to all military operations.
7. **Surprise:** It is a vital ingredient of success in modern warfare.

8. **Cooperation:** It entails the coordination of the activities of all arms of the Services and of allies for optimum, combined effort.
9. **Administration:** Sound administration is needed for the success of any operation. Logistic considerations are often the deciding factors during operations.
10. **Morale:** Morale is probably the most important element of war. High morale fosters offensive spirit and the will to win.

The South African Army has fourteen principles of war. These more or less are a combination of the principles of the US and UK. Their principles are as follows:

1. **Selection and Maintenance of the Aim:** All military activity must be directed to a clearly defined goal and must contribute to the attainment of that goal.
2. **Offensive Action:** The offensive is used to secure the initiative, to maintain freedom of action and to impose one's will on the enemy.
3. **Concentration of Force:** The principle requires superiority of combat power at the critical place and time for a decisive purpose. Concentration must be rapid and secret so that the enemy has too little time to react before the decisive strike is delivered. From this principle, it can be concluded that forces must be dispersed at the proper time and place for security and speed of movement.
4. **Economy of Force:** The principle requires allocation of combat power in such a manner that all tasks are achieved effectively. Focus the right amount of force at the right time at the right location.
5. **Flexibility:** Modern war demands flexibility to enable pre-arranged plans to be altered to meet changing situations. It calls for mobility of a high order, both tactically and strategically.
6. **Unity of Command:** It should ensure unity of effort and thus apply maximum power against the objective at the decisive time and place.
7. **Security:** Active steps must be taken to deny the enemy information which enables him to achieve surprise. Security also means ensuring the safety and integrity of forces and certain non-combatants during all phases of the operation.



8. **Surprise:** Surprise can be achieved both strategically and tactically. Every effort must be made to surprise the enemy and guard against being surprised.
9. **Cooperation:** It entails the coordination of all arms of the Services, army corps and units so as to achieve the maximum effort.
10. **Logistic Support:** It must be so designed as to give the commander freedom of action.
11. **Maintenance of Morale:** Soldiers must be well-trained, well-administered, physically fit and imbued with high morale to achieve the aim.
12. **Manoeuvre:** It is the movement of combat power to provide concentration at the proper time and place to achieve the mission.
13. **Administration:** Without meticulous administration, the chances of success of any operation are quite remote. It is very important to make a very comprehensive administrative plan before embarking on any operation.
14. **Maintenance of Reserves:** A reserve must be established and as soon as it is committed, a new reserve must be organised.

The article further states that subsequently the South African Army added intelligence to the list of principles of war. This was done in the 1990s. In view of the tremendous increase in the availability of information which can be processed to provide intelligence, this would seem to have been a sound decision. The US Army has included intelligence under “combat functions.”

The fact that the US has nine principles, the UK ten and the South African Army 15, makes clear that each one of them has given a rethink and added or subtracted some of them from the original list projected by Clausewitz. The Americans probably have taken a minimalist approach and kept the list short while the South Africans decided to have a longer list, opting for clarity.

The US does not have flexibility, cooperation, administration and morale as principles but certainly gives them due importance in their other documents on conduct of operations. Morale is inferred under leadership and discipline, whilst cooperation is covered under unity of command. Though forerunners and world leaders in the aspect of logistical matters, the US does not state logistics as an independent principle but has covered it comprehensively under combat functions.

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The UK and South Africa do not include simplicity as a principle but refer to the requirement many times when explaining other principles. The South Africans, as an afterthought and perhaps influenced by the US, have added the principles of unity of command and manoeuvre to their list of principles of war. It will be interesting to note that only the South Africans have maintenance of reserves as one of the principles of war. Their experience has obviously convinced them of the importance of maintaining adequate reserves, particularly for taking up

area defensive positions.

An important point to note is that the US, UK and South African Army doctrines hold the selection and maintenance of the aim to be the controlling and most important principle of war. If the aim is not correctly selected and then maintained, the other principles become meaningless. The aim states what is to be achieved, while the other principles are the guides as to how the aim is to be achieved. At the top of the list of the US Army is the principle of the objective. The British regard selection and maintenance of the aim as the master principle. The others have no particular sequence of importance but all must be considered before any operation.

Let us now consider one by one the principles which may be relevant to the modern wars and decide which ones need modification, which ones to discard and which new ones to add.

1. **Mass:** This principle, by and large, implied, "Get there first with the most."

This principle was definitely applicable in the good old days when numerical superiority at the point of impact mattered and when not much difference existed in the technological levels possessed by the two opposing sides. But is it valid today? Or is accuracy more relevant than mass? We often talk of lean and mean force, implying that quality rather than quantity matters. It was

always said that military success will normally result from the concentration of force, at the decisive time and place. This statement needs to be modified to read that military success will normally result from successful precision attacks on the centre of gravity (CoG) of the enemy. Mass destruction needs to be replaced by precision destruction. The recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have further demonstrated the applicability of the above, wherein requisite combat power was attained with a lesser concentration of forces than would have been the case earlier, by a corresponding increase in precision strike, destructive power and mobility of the forces used. In my opinion, we need to change this principle from mass to **precision**.

2. **Selection and Maintenance of the Aim:** This principle implied, "Choose an aim or objective and stick with it." Again debatable. Selection of aim must remain the cardinal principle of war; however, it is necessary to ensure that the definition of this aim is unambiguous. But should maintenance of this aim be treated as a must? Or should this stated aim be modified and refined with changing circumstances as the war progresses, particularly in a long drawn war? One classic example which highlights the disadvantages of sticking to this principle is the Iraq War waged by Bush. There was a stated aim and probably there was more than one ulterior aim or one may deem them as objectives or intentions. But, in any case, the aim was not well defined and lacked clarity. Also, when it became apparent that it was no longer possible to achieve the stated aim, it was not modified. In the case of the war in Vietnam, the US president declared that the aim of the war was not to win but rather to preserve the independence of South Vietnam. The aim was, thus, unclear and unattainable, particularly because of the limitations imposed by the politicians ignoring the principles. The US adopted a defensive strategy and the freedom of South Vietnam could last only as long as the US was prepared to provide the means to maintain the defensive posture. This principle, therefore, needs to be reworded as "**selection and periodic review of the selected aim.**" This would be more applicable in long drawn wars.
3. **Unity of Command:** This principle implies "Place your entire force under the command of a single entity." It also implies cooperation, meaning making a

combined plan of operation. It entails the coordination of the activities of all arms of the Services and of allies for optimum, combined effort. But the magic word which is lacking in this is “integration”. It is a unanimously accepted fact that all future wars will have to be fought jointly by two or more Services. It is, therefore, very important to integrate them well in time, create joint integrated structures, ensure interoperability of their equipment and ensure a joint doctrine for their guidance. In my opinion, it would, thus, be more appropriate to rename this principle as **“integrated joint operations.”**

4. **Economy of Effort:** The essence of this principle shall perhaps stay evergreen. In my opinion, it engulfs the principle of concentration of force as well. Economy of effort implies that just about enough (and no more) decisive strength is concentrated at the critical time and place and there must be no expenditure of effort where it does not affect the outcome of war. The significance of this principle is perhaps gathering more importance as the weapons are getting costlier day by day. In many cases, they have already become unaffordable, hence, it is very important that procurement is done judiciously and expenditure of weapons is wisely controlled. However, as brought out earlier, I feel that the term “economy of effort” tends to convey a wrong impression of saving on overall effort, almost amounting to saying being stingy. The principle, however, relates to secondary efforts and implies that don’t fritter away power in tackling them, instead, use it to achieve superiority at places where it matters. I feel we need to rename it as **“optimum use of effort.”**
5. **OODA Loop:** This is the latest jargon and did not exist when Clausewitz framed his principles of war but I think in today’s context, we need to include this in our latest list of the principles. Victory will generally go to the side which has a shorter observe, orient, decide, act (OODA) cycle. An efficient OODA loop implies good surveillance, effective reconnaissance, smart intelligence, integrated reliable networking, speed, proper reaction, high probability of destruction and, finally, prompt battle damage. I think an **efficient OODA loop** deserves a place in the revised list of principles.
6. **Air Superiority:** In the days of Clausewitz, air power did not exist, as such no

thought could be given to this very important aspect of warfare. If the formulation of principles of war is to be determined after careful debate and study of past wars, then the recent wars would indicate that air power has played a very crucial and decisive role in most of the conflicts and wars fought post-World War II. Each war has brought in its wake many new ideas which have altered the existing philosophies, doctrines and strategies in the employment of air power. Creation of air superiority, if not air supremacy, or at least a favourable air situation would deserve a place amongst the principles for fighting a modern war. This principle, if neglected, would almost certainly result in defeat.

7. **Disruptive Capability:** As the weapons and other means of conducting war are getting more and more hi-tech, their vulnerability to jamming and other disruptive actions is proportionately increasing. A small glitch injected in the network can immensely reduce the warfighting capability of the adversary. Today, a hi-tech fighter aircraft fleet can be grounded by destroying the engineering complex rather than by trying to shoot them down or by attacking the runway and damaging it. I think a good, effective **disruptive capability** can work as a powerful weapon by itself and should, therefore, rightfully find a place as one of the principles of war.
8. **Information Dominance:** This perhaps can be looked at as a part of disruptive capability. Adequate information is critical for effective planning and execution of combat operations. Safeguarding own information, denying it to the enemy and, at the same time, corrupting his information, in other words, winning the information warfare can cause total disruption and paralysis of the opponent and that too without having to fire a bullet. Modern wars are going to get more and more information dominant and it is often said that information warfare will be the start point and its outcome will govern the final victory. I, therefore, think that **information dominance** needs a special mention as a principle by itself.
9. **Survivability:** This is a counter to the disruptive ability of the enemy. The various warfighting assets must be able to survive the enemy attacks. If we talk of second strike capability, then this becomes all the more important.

Survivability of personnel against non-conventional attacks, of equipment against attacks such as the e-bomb become critical issues. These issues did not exist two centuries ago when Clausewitz thought of recommending his principles of war. It is perhaps time now for us to include **survivability** as one of the principles.

10. **Surprise:** Yet another evergreen principle. It is said that nearly half the war can be won by paralysing the enemy through surprise. Surprise implies doing something which the enemy least expects. Surprise is acting in an unpredictable fashion, keeping the enemy guessing about your intentions. It is almost like catching the enemy napping. "Attack when and where the enemy least expects it." It can put the enemy totally off-balance, and, thus, prove to be a great force multiplier to provide the decisive edge at strategic, operational and tactical levels of warfare. It, however, needs to be realised that in today's near transparent battlefield environment, because of high quality surveillance, it will be increasingly difficult to execute surprise; nevertheless, it should be possible and, therefore, we need to retain this principle.
11. **Logistics Support:** Logistic considerations are often the deciding factors during operations. Sound administration is needed for the success of any operation. Sound administration of logistics implies that the right things are made available at the right places in the quickest time-frame and in the most cost-effective way. Today's wars are expected to be short but fierce. Hence, it is all the more important to make a very detailed and well thought out integrated logistics plan to meet the various requirements. This would be a very important ingredient in generating and sustaining the pace and tempo of operations. In my opinion, it continues to be a very important principle of war.
12. **Technology:** Modern wars are actually hi-tech wars. He who has better technology is expected to win. If that be so, then we need to give due importance to this aspect. There are many examples in history to show how technological inventions have changed the course of a battle, how technological surprises have tilted the balance of power. I feel it deserves a special mention as one of the principles of modern warfare.

The above analysis indicates that because of change in the texture of modern wars and many other factors, there is a need to rethink about the principles of war as quoted by Clausewitz. I would recommend the new list of the principles as follows:

- Selection and periodic review of the selected aim.
- Precision approach.
- Integrated joint operations.
- Optimum use of effort.
- OODA loop.
- Air superiority.
- Disruptive capability.
- Information dominance.
- Survivability.
- Surprise.
- Logistic support.
- Technology.

There are many other principles which are talked of by many other countries but I feel those are minor, and in today's context, do not qualify for a special separate mention as principles of war. Quite a few of them are, in any case, inherently included in the principles quoted above.

The above principles relate to conventional wars. What about unconventional wars, also known as asymmetric wars? Would the above principles be equally relevant to such subversive covert wars involving terrorism, militancy, insurgency, etc, or do we need to enumerate separate principles for them? This kind of warfare may take place in own territory and impose limitations on the applicability of the above stated principles. Some of these principles, with slight amendments, may still retain their validity but, overall, I would recommend, that we should lay down separate

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principles for such undefined, abstract, complex, so-called wars after conducting deep study and meaningful discussions. In my opinion, information warfare, more covert, rather than overt, should get the highest priority, followed by reconnaissance. Dedicated intelligence organisations need to be geared up and a comprehensive integrated intelligence picture needs to be created. Special forces, with specialised training and equipment, need to be formed.

In conclusion, it may be said that the present list of the principles of war, as stated by Clausewitz and promulgated by many countries, had been tailored to the wars during the Napoleonic era. The texture, nature and spectrum of recent wars have undergone a significant change. This has resulted in the creation of new doctrines and strategies but somehow the archaic principles of war have not been updated. It is felt that the applicability of these principles to the present and future wars has appreciably reduced. There is, therefore, a need to review them and devise new principles which would be of greater relevance to modern wars.