

Principles of War: Revisit the Histories

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Abstract

“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.”(Sun Tzu)

Since historical period, military organizations and thinkers of many dynasties devised a set of guiding principles or ideas that guided the conduct and study of war. It is obvious that there has never been common agreement on one common list of Principles. Most countries, democratic or and military rule, have their own list of principles, based on their military culture and wide experience and heritage as well. The understanding and application of ‘art and science of warfare’ requires in depth of knowledge acquired through practicing military history far beyond mere principles. Fourth Generation warfare or sub-conventional or asymmetric warfare may well be the dominant form of warfare for some years to come. Time tested Principles of war may work for conventional warfare but a totally different set of principles may be required for Counter Insurgency Operations, information warfare, operations under a nuclear backdrop or other forms of warfare, including cyber warfare. It is important to understand that enemies in 21st century play to their own strengths not others. The Principles of war have evolved over a long period of time. Here, to understand chronologically, its evolution is broadly categorized into three stages: up to Napoleonic Era, Napoleonic Era to end of World War II, and Post-world war II Era.

KEYWORDS:Discipline, Mass, Objective, Offensive, Maneuver, Unity of Command, Security, Simplicity, Surprise, Economy of Force, Restraint, Perseverance and Legitimacy. WMD, MOOTW, Unity of effort; CI Ops

Introduction:

“The art of war teaches us to rely not on the likelihood of the enemy's not coming, but on our own readiness to receive him; not on the chance of his not attacking, but rather on the fact that we have made our position unassailable”. - Sun Tzu

Since historical period, military organizations of many dynasties devised a set of guiding principles or ideas that guide the conduct and study of war. These guiding principles, collected through the ages are termed as the Principles of War. It is obvious that there has never been common agreement on one common list of Principles. Most countries, democratic or and military rule, have their own list of principles, based on their military culture and wide experience and heritage as well. Principles of War are a fundamental to actions concerning the application of combat power [rather than an unquestioned truth with universal application to every single operation]. Principles are

not substitutes for professional understanding, experience and education. They help a military leader to understanding warfare but these are merely guidelines and not a prescription, formula, recipe or checklist for success. *“If you drop your checklist”*, according to John Boyd, *“your brains are below your feet.”* The Principles of War were developed over time and reflect the manner in which civilizations fought and planned to win a war during the First and Second World Wars in general.

Principles of War in the 21st century, exponential growth of Information Technology, introduction of nuclear weapons [particularly in the Indian subcontinent and China], enlarged influence of asymmetric warfare, proxy war and non-state actors and other changes like readily available information have question the values of the 20th c Principles of war. *“One of the purposes behind the principles has been to make new and strange circumstances comprehensible, to draw a thread from one war to another, to force events into a mold and to make conflicts obey the dramatic.... A point is reached in the development of weapon systems beyond which one cannot compare the present and the past.”* He amplified that the principles implied “maximization of means” and, therefore, they were not applicable to limited nuclear war or low intensity conflicts. These demanded *“subtle response, patience, self-control, firmness but not ruthlessness and an ability to settle for something less than total victory.”* These qualities were not supported by the existing Principles of war. The Principles of war, as a guide to military leaders of all stage, will depend on the understanding of the individual military leader, his knowledge of operational skill and his skill in applying the principles within a particular operational sector. The Principles of war are undoubtedly important elements of the ‘art and science of warfare’, but at the same time the understanding and application of this art requires in depth of knowledge acquired through practicing military history far beyond mere principles.

“Principles of War guide commanders and their staffs in the planning and conduct of warfare. They are enduring, but not immutable, absolute or prescriptive, and provide an appropriate foundation for all military activity. The relative importance of each may vary according to context; their application requires judgment, common sense and intelligent interpretation. Commanders also need to take into account the legitimacy of their actions, based on the legal, moral, political, diplomatic and ethical propriety of the conduct of military forces, once committed.” - The 2011 edition of British Defence Doctrine

Evolution of Principal of war:

The Principles of war are the principles expressing the rules of military thought and actions that serve as the permanent basis for combat rules. The application of the Principles of war may differ at different level and for different operation. Therefore their relative importance can be expected to vary from theater to theater. The list of principles is a methodological tool to achieve surprise that differs from army to army and from time to time. While the principles of war remain the same, the list changes according to time and space, with its application which always dependent on the context.

The Principles of war have evolved over a long period of time. Here, to understand chronologically, its evolution is broadly categorized into three stages: up to Napoleonic Era, Napoleonic Era to end of World War II, and Post-world war II Era.

A) Historical Period to Napoleonic Era:

i) Around 500 BC, Sun Tzu, the Chinese Military Thinker, in his book – *The Art of War*, highlighted Principles of war with his convincing experience ‘*how military operations are influenced by uncontrollable factors*’. The major guidelines provided by Sun Tzu, to explain how military operations should be conducted, are:

Laying Plans/The Calculations; Waging War/The Challenge; Attack by Stratagem/The Plan of Attack; Tactical Dispositions/Positioning; Energy/Directing; Weak Points & Strong/Illusion and Reality; Maneuvering/Engaging The Force; Variation in Tactics/The Nine Variations; The Army on the March/Moving The Force; Terrain/Situational Positioning; The Nine Situations/Nine Terrains; The Attack by Fire/Fiery Attack and The Use of Spies/The Use of Intelligence.

ii) In the second half of 4th c. BC, Indian theorist contemporary to Sun Tzu, Kautilya’s the *Arthashastra* throws some light on the ancient Indian Strategic Culture. Kautilya pronounced the following factors involved in planning a successful campaign:

Power in terms of strength of fighting forces, enthusiasm and energy; Place of operation, type of terrain and selection of ground of own choosing; Time of military engagement; season for marching towards the battleground; when to mobilize different types of forces; Possibility of revolts and rebellions in the rear; Likely losses, expenses and gains; and Likely dangers.

iii) In the 16th c AD, Niccolo Machiavelli, in his book, *The Art of War* (published in 1521) highlights following general rules for military laws: ‘the importance of morale, security, surprise, discipline, need for reserves, know yourself and know your enemy, use of terrain, logistics, intelligence and objective.’

iv) In the 18th c AD, Maurice de Saxe, one of the most successful and colourful military leaders in the European History, the theory found in his book *Reveries* (published in 1757), suggested some rules with emphasis on the need of: ‘administration, logistics, morale, deception, initiative, leadership and discipline.’

v) Frederick the Great, in his book, *Instructions for the Generals*, inked the theory of war to guide a great military commander. He did not offer any list of principles but offers some rules for success. He stressed in his work on: ‘logistics, manoeuvre, security, cultural awareness, morale, initiative and leadership.’

B) Napoleonic Era to World War II:

vi) Napoleon: Napoleon fought more battles than Alexander, the great or any other expansionist ruler in the history of world. His methods of warfare and his military exploits dominated military thinking for most of the 19th century rulers of Europe contributed greatly to the evolution of the Principles of war. Napoleon never inked his theories of war, but his rules of war were experienced, recorded and provide some insights to his genius, and his maxims clearly illustrate what he thought to be important for victory in war: 'discipline, leadership, momentum, manoeuvre, mass, firepower, logistics, intelligence, morale, security, initiative, objective and unity of command.'

vi) Henri Jomini was the most important theorist of first half of 19th century to interpret the successes of Napoleon in wars. Jomini perhaps contributed more for the Principles of war than any theorist prior to him and he certainly became the catalyst for the future war lords. Jomini's military writings are frequently analyzed: he took a moral, prescriptive approach, reflected in a detailed vocabulary of geometric terms such as bases, strategic lines, and key points and he kept his operational prescription basically simple - put superior combat power at the decisive point. Jomini's actual experience of war made his writings a great deal became more credible and useful. He dealt at length with a number of practical subjects (logistics, sea-power) that Clausewitz had ignored. According to him:

"War in its ensemble is NOT a science, but an art. Strategy, particularly, may indeed be regulated by fixed laws resembling those of the positive sciences, but this is not true of war viewed as a whole. Among other things, combats may be mentioned as often being quite independent of scientific combinations, and they may become essentially dramatic, personal qualities and inspirations and a thousand other things frequently being the controlling elements. The passions which agitate the masses that are brought into collision, the warlike qualities of these masses, the energy and talent of their commanders, the spirit, more or less martial, of nations and epochs - in a word, everything that can be called the poetry and metaphysics of war, will have a permanent influence on its results."

He defined the principles in four rules in the summary of the Art of War:

'how men should be directed at decisive points against enemy lines of communication while protecting your own; Manoeuvre with strength against enemy weakness; Throw the mass of force onto the enemy's decisive point; and Mass force so it is not only used against the decisive point, but at the proper time with the proper amount of force.'

vii) Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), was contemporary to Henri Jomini, worked on strategy and produced work On War and The Principles of War. Clausewitz is considered as one of the outstanding theorists of war, his works are complex and difficult to understand in contrast with Jomini's lucid and prescriptive works. However, the fundamental Principles of war have brought both clarity to military planning and operations, and hence considered as valuable,

well-used framework for the study and teaching of warfare. Clausewitz may be more significant for researchers, but Jomini's work has been considered more use to practical military professionals.

Clausewitz's principles of war are as follows:

Mass [Get there first with the most]; Objective [Choose an objective and stick with it]; Offensive [Seize the Initiative]; Maneuver [Move to more advantageous positions]; Unity of Command [Place your entire force under the command of a single entity]; Security [Don't let the enemy rob you of your advantages]; Simplicity [Keep your plans clear and simple]; Surprise [Attack when the enemy least suspects it]; and Economy of Force [Allocate your limited forces wisely]

viii) Ferdinand Foch struggled with the morale and material factors of war and attempted to explain them by combining the two. Foch was able to combine the ideas from both sides of the debate over the Principles of War into his theory, which he insisted to first consist of a number of principles: economy of force, freedom of action, free disposition of forces, and security.

The World War I forced countries to review their doctrine in the light of the costly lessons learned in the War. The Principles of war again became the subject of debate in most major Militaries.

ix) In 1920, the British army published what they claimed to be the "Principles of War." The eight principles with brief discussion. The list of the eight principles was titled the Principles of war, not of strategy or tactics:

Maintenance of the Objective; Offensive action; surprise; Concentration; economy of Force; security; Mobility and Cooperation.

"It was the emergence of the Principles of war into accepted operational terminology, no longer just in theory, but doctrine. In the years that followed, many militaries, including of the United States, would adopt the Principles of war into doctrine, but it was the British who did it first." The United States Army (influenced by the work of J F C Fuller) published the Principles of war in a doctrine barely a year after the British army. It is important to note that the United States adopted Fuller's list completely, with adding the principle of simplicity. During World War II, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery published several pamphlets for his forces listing eight Principles of War. Montgomery introduced air power, administration, morale to the modern list and also the principle of simplicity. After the World War II, the British adopted ten principles which have remained very similar to this day.

C) Post-World War II Era:

x) In 1949, the Principles of War that were adapted by the United States' doctrine are:

The Objective; simplicity; Unity of Command; The Offensive; Manoeuvre Mass; economy of Forces; surprise; and security.

Analysis of the Present Principles of War, the British Defence Doctrine gives the Principles of war as:

selection and Maintenance of the aim; Maintenance of Morale; Offensive action; security; surprise; Concentration of Force; economy of effort; Flexibility; Cooperation; and sustainability.

In 1990, the United States' military introduced separate principles for Military Operations Other Than War (thereafter mentioned as **MOOTW**) as:

Objective; Unity of effort; Legitimacy; Perseverance; Restraint; and Security.

There is a difference between war operations and other military operations. The United State's Military has since recognized the 'error' of different Principles of war for MOOTW perhaps after First Iraq War. In the Doctrine for the armed Forces of the United States Joint Publications (**JP-1**) the original nine Principles of war, as mentioned above and included three unique Principles of MOOTW – Restraint, Perseverance and Legitimacy.

The Joint Doctrine of the Indian armed Force, published by Headquarters Integrated Defence staff, Ministry of Defence, the Government of India, June 2007, gives out the following Principles of war for the Indian armed forces:

Selection and Maintenance of aim; Maintenance of Morale; Offensive action; surprise; Concentration of Force; economy of effort; security; Flexibility; Cooperation; simplicity; administration; and Intelligence. In view of counter-insurgency operations / proxy war, conventional war with weapons of mass destruction (thereafter mentioned as WMDs), the Kargil Operations and information age operations with digitalisation of the battlefield taking place in the 21st century, an analysis of the present Principles of war as applicable to the Indian army in the above backdrop is discussed as "*Simplicity a good simple plan with concise clear words minimises the chances of confusion. To seek the advantage over the enemy and to obviate a bloody attrition contest, there is need to develop plans that are inherently complicated. Complication is an unfortunate by-product of the search for advantage.*" There is a need for a balance between complexity and simplicity particularly in counter Insurgency Operations (thereafter **CI Ops**).

Principal of War in 21st Century:

Fourth Generation, sub-conventional and asymmetric warfare, whatever we may call it, may well be the dominant form of warfare for some years to come. But inter-state wars have become so complex that no single set of Principles of war can apply to all variations of war. Time tested Principles of war may work for conventional warfare but a totally different set of principles may be required for CI Ops, information warfare, operations under a nuclear backdrop or other forms of warfare, including cyber warfare. Conventional wars are focused on the enemy's military, and on the other hand CI Ops are focused on the population which is the center of gravity. The two conflicts are completely different. They do not relate to the important broader issues of war such as social, religious, political, economic, and territorial and culture factors without which conflict and wars between nation and groups cannot be understood.

The Principles of war were derived from experiences and writings concerning warfare in the Agrarian and early Industrial Ages. At that stage, in the development of military thought, there was little or no distinction among the various levels of war strategy, operational and tactical levels of war. In 21st century, new threats are emerging from groups and people who are disconnected from the wave of globalization and not connected to the core of emerging societies.

This holds enormous implications for the Principles of war. Do the existing Principles of warfare provide insights on strategy, operational art or only the tactical level of war? Can the Principles of War govern conflict at sea and in the air? Are all the Principles of war equal? These are few of the issues which require objective and comprehensive analysis.

In today's warfare, the factor of public/world opinion has acquired such significance that this is perhaps the most important consideration influencing the beginning, conduct and end of any war. It is to make military leaders of all ranks relate to both in planning the battle and its execution. At every level, who so ever plans and executes the same in war, has to consider how it will be presented and appear in the electronic media. It is important to understand that enemies in 21st century are "dynamic, unpredictable, diverse, fluid, networked and constantly evolving" and it important to note that they play to their own strengths not others. The Indian armed forces are the most battle hardened in the world in both conventional and CI Ops. A considerable part of our army has been deployed in CI/CT operations since long.

Conclusion:

Every army has its own lists of the Maxims (Principles) of war. Where change is necessary, we have to be cautious in effecting it. Our current Principles of War are more reflective of the way we fought in the past than the manner in which we plan to fight today and in the future. There is need to update them (Maxims of war) to meet the challenges of the 21st century. It must be understood that listing the Principles of War specifically in the doctrine does not mean the same would be applied by the military commanders. The conduct of war is best understood as both an art and science.

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