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Review Article

## The Transformation of India's Military Strategy and Warfare in the 21st Century

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### Abstract

The landscape of 21st-century warfare has changed from kinetic, attrition-based wars to non-contact, network-centric, effect-based combat operations. This paper examines the strategic evolution of India's military capacity: the process of incorporating and modernising aerial platforms and missile systems as the pillars of national defence. Facing a changing geopolitical landscape and the threat of a "two-front" collusive confrontation, it analyses the recalibration of the Indian Air Force (IAF) and strategic forces doctrinal orientations to achieve air supremacy and credible deterrence. The research critically reviews the role played by advanced aircraft technology platforms. It highlights the tactical synergy between fighter aircraft and new unmanned systems in the coming years, including High-Altitude Long-Endurance (HALE) UAVs and loitering munitions. It also analyses how India's missile architecture has evolved and subsequent initiatives such as tactical precision, strategic deterrence, and the multiple layers of defence provided by air-defence systems. The paper concludes with a discussion of why Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliance) is crucial towards decreasing India's dependency upon foreign Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs), and concludes that developing hypersonic technologies, directed energy weapons, and secure data links is critical for India to project power and retain strategic autonomy both in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and globally.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

India has made the switch to Modern Warfare: The Path of Modernisation. The development of contemporary warfare has its roots in the global landscape of South-East Asia, especially in the historical trajectory of modernisation of India's engagement with modern war, and more so, the continued violence over Kashmir. Since the partitioning of British India in 1947 and the creation of the new India and Pakistan, the region has seen chronic unrest and recurring military conflicts between the two nations [18]. The Kashmir issue, stemming from the independence drive and associated land disputes, has been a driving force behind India's military posture and the employment of cutting-edge military techniques. Since independence, India and Pakistan have fought four major wars, and the 1971 one is the most disastrous in terms of deaths and prisoners of war (Sreevatsa, 2022). The total number of casualties from these wars consists of an estimated 27,650 soldiers killed, with thousands more wounded, and serves to highlight the scale and nature of conventional military engagements in the region (Sreevatsa, 2022). The prolonged bilateral conflict has forced India to diversify its military doctrine further and adopt more modern strategies to address the traditional risks and challenges posed by both conventional and non-traditional conflicts. Continued hostilities and flare-ups in the Kashmir dispute have drawn special attention in the political science literature to the regional military and security implications of modernisation. The timeline of events in the India-Pakistan war offers a framework for understanding the gradual evolution of arms from conventional methods of fighting to advanced military power, with roots in history, in which the histories of India and Pakistan have been intertwined in the modern sense.

Modern warfare is characterised by rapid technological development, which has transformed the nature of war from the age of mechanised fighting to a brilliant and informationised era. In modern warfare, the fundamental elements of success increasingly centre on adopting advanced information systems, real-time data processing, and intelligence systems, such as artificial intelligence, for war decision-making and operations. A fundamental characteristic of the current fight is the extensive use of highly data-intensive, information-rich systems. Systems that can process, manipulate, and then work with massive quantities of data in real time. This data includes the battlefield's physical landscape as well as valuable insights into the actions and decisions of friendly and adversary forces. Big data analytics helps military organisations better predict and respond to changes on the battlefield, improving operational efficiency and effectiveness. Such information warfare represents a shift away from traditional paradigms of warfare, which were heavily based on mechanisation and the projection of physical force. Also, the future of warfare will be dictated by the adoption of intelligent technologies in military operations. Intelligent warfare uses sophisticated technologies in computerised decision-making, the operation of automated machines/robots, and the thoughtful allocation of resources. The outcome is a battlefield where the demands of speed, precision, and flexibility are fundamental, and where superior

tech can mean dramatic strategic gains. This approach to war, combined with intelligent systems and intelligence-driven decision-making, has transformed war-fighting from a battle between men into a one-person war. Moreover, the continued evolution of modern warfare into an informatized and intelligent war emphasises the need for technological innovations and data-driven interventions in military conflicts to shape conduct and outcomes.

### **Historical Context: India's first encounters with modern warfare**

India's earliest experiences of modern warfare can be traced to the Afghan and Turkish invasions, especially to the raids of Mahmud of Ghazni from 1000 to 1027 AD (Amose, 2017). Such invasions were known for their systematic destruction of monuments, the destruction of industries, the plundering of wealth, and the enslaving of thousands of skilled labourers. The recurring attacks laid bare deep cracks in already shattered India's army and institutions, which had become splintered and insular by this period. Moreover, the failure to unify around a single response and to adapt to and coordinate with new forms of warfare made the military organisation even more vulnerable to external aggression. As institutional stability was compromised (by the fall of major Nalanda), the intellectual and strategic base from which any resistance could happen was diminished, as a solid, centralised empire no longer supported these centres.

India's fragmented societal architecture created significant barriers to modern warfare, Central Asian scholar Al-Beruni, who travelled widely in India in the early 11th century, noted a social construction of Indian culture as one of cultural superiority and discouragement of sharing or gaining knowledge from outsiders. This view stood in dramatic contrast to the time when India had defeated foreign invaders such as the Sakas and Kushanas and had helped spread Indian civilisation and technology throughout Asia. By the 11th century, though, the country was deeply divided along regional, caste, and sub-caste lines and had become less capable of collective action and innovation. This intransigent approach discouraged the integration of cutting-edge military technology and technologies which were introduced by invading powers, making India increasingly susceptible to conquest.

### **The Role of Technology in Contemporary Warfare: Theoretical Perspectives**

The evolution of strategic thought in modern warfare has attracted considerable academic attention. Theories of Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW) highlight the distinct characteristics of contemporary conflicts, including non-linear tactics and a focus on ideological struggles (Trochan, 2024). Unlike previous generations of warfare that emphasised state actor confrontations, 4GW highlights the significance of non-state actors and their ability to influence and manipulate socio-cultural narratives through modern communications (Maisaia, 2021). Additionally, the legitimacy and conceptual clarity surrounding terms such as "hybrid warfare" are debated among scholars. Hovhannisyanyan's comparative analysis emphasises the

ambiguities and varying interpretations of hybrid and grey zone warfare as essential frameworks for understanding modern conflicts (Hovhannisyanyan, 2025). These academic discussions are vital for military strategists seeking to adapt their approaches to the evolving criteria of warfare in the 21st century.

## Significant Conflicts as Combat Tests for India's Modern Military Capabilities

### 1. Cyberspace Warfare as a Contemporary Battlefield

It implies that the new era of Indian engagement with contemporary war has increasingly featured the incorporation and tactical application of high-speed cyber-defence capabilities within the context of grand conflicts and ongoing security threats. Specialised agencies like the Defence Cyber Agency (DCyA) and the National Cyber Coordination Centre (NCCC) represent a strategic pivot in which cyberspace is increasingly recognised as a vital area for military activities. Monitoring, managing, and responding to cyber threats, which are part of the broader domain of contemporary warfare, are the agency's responsibilities.

The challenges India faces in implementing cyber policies underscore the urgency of addressing technological vulnerabilities and emphasise their critical importance to the understanding of regional security. Moreover, the importance of inter-agency cooperation and understanding the socio-political context of operations cannot be overstated. The need to foster cross-cultural competencies within military ranks has emerged as a critical factor in executing successful operations in diverse environments ("Cross-Cultural Competence for a Twenty-First-Century Military", 2013). The use of advanced models for real-time detection and threat identification within agencies is a test of India's ability to defend its military infrastructure against sophisticated cyber attacks. It requires integrating network traffic data from established monitoring systems, secure APIs for data sharing, and predictive models that issue real-time warnings. These systems are tested under limited monitoring conditions, demonstrating high performance and compliance with military threat detection requirements, thereby proving their robustness. The process of deployment, testing, and retuning illustrates how cyber warfare constantly evolves, and as threats evolve, India's existing military resources have never been enough.

### 2. Aerial Platforms: UAVs and Their Strategic Implications

In recent years, the proliferation and tactical employment of UAVs have reshaped operational capabilities in the India-Pakistan conflict. These platforms are used not only for reconnaissance but also in combat, enhancing situational awareness and force projection capabilities. For instance, Pakistan has focused on utilising drones for surveillance and tactical strikes. However, its operational effectiveness is constrained by a limited navigational and communication infrastructure compared with India, which has undertaken extensive efforts to develop advanced aerospace and military capabilities (Rana, 2023). UAV technologies, such as those

designed for precision landing and obstacle avoidance, demonstrate the increasing sophistication in drone operations. Innovations in guidance and control systems have led to enhanced autonomy in UAVs, which are critical in military operations where GPS signals may be compromised (Liu et al., 2025; Safwat et al., 2019). India's investment in these technologies bolsters its strategic edge over Pakistan, complicating Pakistan's military calculus regarding aerial threats and responses.

### 3. The Shift from Conventional to Irregular Warfare

Modern warfare increasingly features irregular and hybrid tactics, which contrast sharply with traditional, state-centric military engagements. Shrestha posits that the rise in insurgencies, civil wars, and terrorism has led military forces to adapt to a reality in which conventional battles are replaced by multifaceted security challenges that include humanitarian crises and failed-states scenarios (Shrestha, 2022). This shift underscores the need for military forces to develop new competencies that prioritise non-kinetic strategies, including collective security and stabilisation initiatives (Azad et al., 2022; "Cross-Cultural Competence for a Twenty-First-Century Military", 2013). The U.S. military's experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan illustrate these adaptations. Researchers have highlighted a fundamental flaw in U.S. military strategy: it often relies on conventional models that fail to account for the complexities of contemporary conflicts against irregular forces (Cleveland et al., 2018). This reliance results in a mismatch between military capabilities and operational environments, indicating a significant gap in understanding modern warfare methodologies.

### 4. Hybrid Warfare and Its Strategic Implications

Hybrid warfare is the convergence of conventional military tactics and irregular, non-state forces, creating a complex battlefield environment that includes both military and non-military elements. Maisaia discusses how the Russian military doctrine exemplifies hybrid warfare, emphasising the integration of information warfare, economic strategies, and military force in conflicts against Georgia and Ukraine (Maisaia, 2022). This multidimensional approach necessitates reevaluating traditional military doctrines to encompass a broader spectrum of engagement strategies that also account for cyber warfare and psychological operations. Furthermore, Duginets and Бываева argue that hybrid warfare compels states to pursue comprehensive strategies that extend beyond mere military action to include socio-political manoeuvres designed to disrupt all facets of an adversary's society (Duginets & Бываева, 2022). This calls for an intricate understanding of geopolitical influences, information dissemination, and the roles of non-state actors in shaping outcomes in modern conflicts.

### 5. Missile Systems: Deterrence and Strategic Stability

Missile systems are another cornerstone of modern warfare, serving both offensive and defensive capabilities. India's development of advanced missile technology, including the

Agni, Kalam (K) and Prithvi series, directly impacts the deterrence dynamics in the region. These systems not only signify India's technological advancements but also challenge the existing military balance, prompting Pakistan to enhance its missile capabilities in response. This has led to an escalating arms race that complicates regional stability and security (Dursey, 2024). The discourse surrounding nuclear deterrence in South Asia further complicates these dynamics. The strategic doctrines of both nations have evolved, particularly in the context of India's no-first-use policy and Pakistan's reliance on tactical nuclear weapons for deterrence (Sharma, 2016; Daud, 2023). Such policies highlight the critical role of missile systems in national defence strategies, underscoring the need to enhance them.

## 6. Comparative Military Capabilities: Aerial and Missile Systems

The comparative analysis of India and Pakistan's military capabilities reveals stark contrasts shaped by technological investments and strategic priorities. India has established a more robust infrastructure for the deployment and operation of UAVs and missile systems, leveraging its technological base and international partnerships. In contrast, Pakistan's military strategy increasingly focuses on asymmetric warfare and the development of tactical nuclear weapons to offset conventional disadvantages (Saud & Arif, 2019; Rana, 2023). Recent conflicts, such as the May 2025 and 2019 Pulwama-Balakot incident, underscore the operational challenges and strategic calculations that both nations face. The event catalysed an intense evaluation of deterrence policies, with discussions revolving around the effectiveness and stability of aerial and missile systems in preventing escalation (Ali, 2022). The prior incidents serve as case studies illustrating the intricate interplay of these military technologies in shaping bilateral relations.

## Impacts of Modern Warfare on India's Defence Strategies

The emergence of modern warfare, especially in the cyber domain, has significantly affected India's defence posture and its global implications. However, the problem is that, today, even though India has made considerable progress in developing strategies to address cyber threats, there is still room for improvement in creating policies and procedures and implementing them meaningfully. Some explanations for this discrepancy include political constraints, reluctance to participate in multistakeholder discussions, and difficulty in leveraging global cyber negotiations. Despite India's sophisticated cyber diplomacy and policies, their execution remains limited, so the nation's cyber defence policy does not yet appear to be working more effectively than planned. Given the ineffectiveness of policy and the implementation of actions, we may need to adopt a more decentralised approach—bringing together the cyber team, the state, and the general public—to promote national cyber resilience. A strong foundation for cyber defence is prioritised to enhance the overall security posture. This underscores the importance of cybersecurity resiliency. Contemporary warfare has shifted adversaries' attention away from targeted assaults on secure military and

government infrastructure and toward vulnerabilities within everyday individuals and private-sector companies. This indirect approach gives potential foes a methodical means of accessing increasingly sensitive data, while emphasising the importance of a holistic, multipronged cyber defence response. India's current position, centred on cyber deterrence, has left it with a lower capacity for offensive cyberwar than regional powers like China. India must develop both cyber infrastructure and operational approaches to meet national security objectives at strategic, operational and tactical levels to counter these dynamic threats. It is an approach that relies not only on advanced technology but also on extensive public education and personnel training to foster a culture of cyber literacy and resistance.

## Cybersecurity Skills Development and Capacity Building in Cybersecurity

The growing number of cyber warfighting professionals with technical and cyber skills, in line with the rapid pace of modern military requirements, is critical. Although India is aware of the growing need, as reflected in white papers and policy analyses, to be recognised for high-quality programs, large-scale efforts to develop cyber literacy skills in these areas have not been introduced. Ideas such as forming cyber hubs or centres and national cyber literacy institutions have yet to be thoroughly researched, as the creation of cyber hubs and national cyber literacy standards is scarcely addressed. Without a comprehensive, national, joined-up training effort, and with personnel serving as specialists and each member contributing equally to specialised units, India's defence infrastructure is exposed as a significant vulnerability. It is crucial to bridge this gap, however, to develop a resilient defence infrastructure capable of confronting complex cyber threats and securing the public and private sectors.

## Challenges and Opportunities in Integrating Advanced Technologies

Modern military operations: the use of state-of-the-art technologies like the Internet of Battlefield Things (IoBT). As such, IoBT enables the integration of multiple battlefield assets into a more intelligent, interoperable network that supports better communication, coordination, and ultimately decision-making. By utilising a complete sensing mesh comprising ground and air sensors, wearable technology, and multimodal sensing capabilities (audio, visual, infrared, radar, and biological), this integration significantly enhances military capabilities and operational efficiency. Together, these technologies are providing unprecedented situational awareness of the constantly evolving, dynamic battlefield in real time. The deployment of robotics and autonomous vehicles, such as drones and swarm intelligence systems, increases the penetration and operational flexibility of military forces while minimising human exposure to dangerous environments. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is the cognitive backbone of this ecosystem, providing autonomous decision-making, predictive analysis, and self-optimisation. AI-supported systems further reinforce the robustness of military networks by self-healing,

ensuring they continue to function in adversarial environments. These capabilities can be supported by advanced connectivity protocols, especially 5G and beyond, that provide high-bandwidth, low-latency communications necessary for real-time operations. Software-defined network (SDN) slicing and customisation help prioritise mission-critical communications and make better use of available resources. This hybrid approach allows both tactical, immediate reaction and strategic consideration when analysing data using edge and cloud computing architectures. Cloud computing delivers scalability and advanced analytics for complex operations, while edge computing enables real-time, simultaneous data processing at the tactical edge, reducing bandwidth dependence. The combination of Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) technologies also enhances situational awareness and training, providing personnel with an immersive, interactive experience. Cybersecurity and blockchain techniques are integrated to protect secure sharing and integrity of data within the battlespace network. Other new computational paradigms, including neuromorphic and quantum, can broaden computational capabilities and challenge traditional front-line capabilities. When deployed together, these complementary technologies contribute to a complex, robust set of solutions, one that brings together commands on all planes with maximum control over the operational environment, in this case, as well as high-level operational information for commanders.

Despite its immense potential, the use of advanced technology in military operations offers significant opportunities but also poses major challenges. At the top of these is cybersecurity. IoBT systems are highly interconnected and sensitive, leaving them vulnerable to advanced hacking and cyber-attacks that may jeopardise mission-critical operations and ultimately threaten the security of military missions. Therefore, implementing solid cybersecurity protocols is critical to protecting sensitive information and ensuring operational continuity. Another big challenge is interoperability, as the heterogeneity of systems and platforms, especially those from multiple manufacturers, must work seamlessly. Such interoperability must be coupled with robust security measures, supported by standardised interfaces and protocols, and validated through testing. These challenges are exacerbated by the harsh, unpredictable conditions of the battlespace, where power and battery constraints are especially prevalent. In such scenarios, field devices must operate reliably for extended periods, and power consumption and other resource demands must be managed in novel ways. IoBT technology generates large amounts of data to support the network. Military networks need to support massive data flows with very low latency to facilitate real-time decision-making and work around the power constraints of long-term operations. Security, interoperability, power management, and network performance are interconnected challenges that make deploying advanced military technologies more challenging than ever. Tackling these challenges will require a comprehensive, interdisciplinary solution that leverages strengths and addresses weaknesses to enable optimal, more resilient use of IoBT and associated systems for operations.

### **Future Prospects for India's Modern Warfare Capabilities**

The future direction of Indian modern warfare capabilities will be significantly shaped by the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into military operations. With the aid of global applications, particularly the U.S. military's Kill Chain model, AI is likely to accelerate and improve targeting by automating the identification, tracking, and prioritisation of enemy assets. Such automation facilitates quicker, more accurate military decision-making in time-critical combat situations, reducing the window between initial discovery and active engagement. Initiatives such as DARPA's Collaborative Operations in Denied Environment (CODE) illustrate the potential of AI-enabled autonomous systems that collaborate and operate dynamically in contested environments, potentially adding value to India's operational force. The rapid and steady pace of AI development indicates that such integrations are not only speculative but increasingly practicable, with new applications coming to market frequently that could be deployed to meet India's needs.

### **Artificial Intelligence-Innovations within Submarine and Undersea Warfare**

AI in Submarine and Undersea Warfare is another important field to examine in the near future. The United States Navy's Large Displacement Unmanned Undersea Vehicle (LDUUV) program illustrates how AI can enhance the capabilities of autonomous underwater vehicles across various missions, including intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR), mine countermeasures, and offensive operations. For India, given its strategic importance in the Indian Ocean, a new system to harness AI at sea would significantly enhance its offshore operational capabilities. Machine learning can also enhance submarine communications systems, such as Extremely Low Frequency (ELF) and Very Low Frequency (VLF) systems, which are crucial for maintaining underwater command and control. It would enable Indian submarines and underwater assets to operate more efficiently and safely in contested sea environments.

### **CONCLUSION**

In summary, modern warfare in the 21st century is characterised by a complex interplay of irregular tactics, technological advancements, and hybrid methodologies that challenge traditional military paradigms. The geopolitical landscape necessitates a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics, compelling military forces to adapt their strategies accordingly. As the nature of conflict continues to evolve, scholarly discourse on hybrid and irregular warfare will remain essential for informing military strategies and crafting adequate responses to today's multifaceted security challenges.

#### **Conclusion**

In the context of modern warfare in South Asia, the roles of aerial platforms and missile systems fundamentally influence the strategic landscape between India and Pakistan. The advancements in UAV technologies and missile capabilities serve as both tools of warfare and instruments of deterrence, necessitating ongoing evaluation of their implications for

regional security. The complex interplay between technological development and strategic doctrine will continue to shape the evolving military dynamics in this sensitive region. Understanding these developments is crucial for comprehending the future trajectory of India-Pakistan relations, particularly as each country adapts to the challenges posed by modern military capabilities.

### Conflicts of interest

The authors report no relevant financial or non-financial conflicts of interest.

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