A Swift and Decisive Victory

The Strategic Implications of What Victory Means

BY CHONG SHI HAO

"The mission of MINDEF [Ministry of Defence of Singapore] and the Singapore armed forces is to enhance Singapore's peace and security through deterrence and diplomacy, and should these fail, to secure a swift and decisive victory over the aggressor."[1]

The national purpose driving the build-up of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) to its third generation has been the deterrence of any potential adversary and achieving victory if war does break out. Because the mission statement above serves as a guide for SAF's defense policy and also its transformation efforts, it is important to be clear about what this "victory" entails. The adjectives "swift and decisive" help to illuminate the nature of this victory that we seek to obtain. As Clausewitz puts it succinctly, "no one starts a war or rather no one in his senses ought to do so without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it."

This quote sums up the concern of this essay, which aims to add clarity to what victory should look like, in light of recent events and the evolution of modern warfare. It is to help us be clear about the victory we want to achieve (i.e. what is winning?). The definition of the victory SAF aims to accomplish has to be re-examined within the context of today's debate over the future of war. The texture and nature of this victory have obvious implications for our conduct of war – strategy, operations and tactics (i.e. how to win?) – and also how we tailor future transformation of the SAF to meet what this victory requires (how we prepare ourselves to win?). One of the main issues here is that as warfare evolves, our notion of victory must adapt accordingly. Most

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importantly, a victory has to create the right conditions that will engender enduring peace and a positive strategic outcome. Indeed, what matters is the strategic outcome; a victory that is not just an operational and tactical one but also goes beyond the battlefield. This is exemplified by the conversation between Col. Harry Summers and a North Vietnamese officer; Col. Summers commented, "The United States had won all the battles;" to which the North Vietnamese replied, "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant."[2]

Victory is perceived rather than objectively based on tangible measures. This perception is in turn shaped by traditional media and more importantly now, the new social media. Being able to manage social tools such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube is crucial to shaping regional and international perceptions of victory. Rupert Smith likened conducting military operations to being, "on a stage, in an amphitheater or Roman arena."[3] He argues that the media must be an integral part of planning, because it is the audience who decides whether the overall show is a success. Our conduct of war will have to address this.

This essay then will first discuss the sociopolitical context and developments in which the SAF may fight. This affects the definition of victory. It will then turn to our conduct of war in the pursuit of this victory.

Today's Context

"We are not likely to get the future right. We just need to make sure we don't get it too wrong."

– General James Mattis, USMC, Joint Forces Command Commander[4]

The nature of war has remained fundamentally unchanged throughout history, although the waging of warfare has evolved concomitantly with society and changing technology.[5] This is why we find the writings of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz so abiding and applicable even after so many years. Modern warfare has developed from the Napoleonic legions to static trench warfare to today's precision and network-centric warfare. War is a strategic concept while warfare is a tactical concept.[6] The way we conduct warfare must meet the purposes of the war we plan to win. The kind of victory and how we should seek it has to adapt to new circumstances.

Hybrid vs. Fourth Generation Warfare

The current debate among scholars and military practitioners remains a U.S.-centric view of future threats. However, there are some general insights that can be gleaned from it. Fourth generation warfare, or 4GW, according to William Lind, is a return to warfare before nation-states existed, as diverse political entities fought each other.[7] They were religious, cultural, linguistic and racial groups, not just nation-states. 4GW practitioners choose targets with a mental and moral impact on the political will of their enemies in order to induce them to give up their strategic goals. They concentrate on crafting a persuasive message, rather than on destroying the material power of their enemy.

Hybrid warfare, whose main advocate is National Defense University's Francis Hoffman, argues that war is moving towards a convergence of categories,[8] a blurring of neat distinctions between conventional and irregular, combat actions and nation-building, terrorism and sabotages by commandos or paramilitaries. Further, states as well as non-state

actors that share the same strategic interests can conduct hybrid war, making a war against them complex and intractable.[9] This type of conflict favors the country that can wage asymmetric and conventional warfare simultaneously, through the use of their uniformed soldiers and civilian-dressed irregulars. The problem Hoffman raises is that armies tend to settle for elegant categories of threats and fail to acknowledge the complex "blending of threats that could exist."[10]

While the SAF has adopted the full spectrum operations concept, with different army formations fulfilling various operations, we need to acknowledge the possibility that in theater we have to perform the whole gamut of missions simultaneously (lethal, non-lethal,

stabilization operations, etc.). This entails having flexible mindsets regarding what we are supposed to do and possessing adaptable skills.

Colin Gray warns that the danger for defense policymakers is the propensity to develop solutions for challenges they prefer and find easy to solve, rather than what their adversaries are most likely to do.[11] The assumption that our potential adversary will always fight conventionally might be an assumption we should beware of. Knowing this, our adversary could exploit racial, religious, linguistic and any other fissures to his full advantage, requiring us to prepare for a form of "hybrid war where adversaries attempt to simultaneously employ traditional, disruptive,

Cpl. Preston Reed

U.S. Marine Cpl. Julian McBride places the company guide-on with the company flags from 1ˢᵗ Battalion Singapore Guards to mark the beginning of Exercise Valiant Mark in Singapore, Sept. 19, 2011. Exercise Valiant Mark, in its 10ᵗʰ iteration, is an annual exercise conducted by U.S Marines and the Singapore Armed Forces in order to maintain a high level of interoperability, enhanced military to military relations and to enrich mutual combat capabilities through combined training.

catastrophic and/or irregular capabilities to attain their objectives."[12]

Humanization of Warfare

Societies around the world are generally becoming post-modern in culture, attitudes and values. Singapore is no exception in today's global village. Postmodernism has led to a more humane society with a greater emphasis on individual rights, autonomy, diversity and a reduced emphasis on authority.[13] The older generations often criticize the army as having gone "soft;" rather, SAF has actually become more humane in our training, as opposed to going "slack."

Postmodernism has changed society's view of war. While pre-modern violence may have been isolated from most of society, post-modernists demand a more stringent use of force by their armed forces and are wary of sending soldiers into harm's way.[14]

British scholar Christopher Coker argues that the accumulated impact is the humanization of warfare.[15] Greater individualism and greater importance attached to humanity in war (evidenced by the dramatic decrease in the cost in human lives today) have made it the duty of generals to keep their soldiers alive for as long as possible. Coker argues that "the modern battlefield has no place for the 'bloody boots on the ground realists who insist you cannot win without planting the flag on enemy turf while wading in the blood of your comrades.'"[16]

What then is the implication of this process? A military is not divorced from the society but shares its attitudes. The fear is that the concern for human lives, itself a laudable

Lt. Col. James Tan of the Singapore Armed Forces speaks with local contractors, Sep. 25, 2008, at the site for the Bamyan Regional Health Training Center.

thing, can become so overwhelming that force protection becomes emphasized over the aggressive tactics required for mission success. Part of the solution has been the increasing reliance on technology to deliver victory, such as unmanned aerial vehicles, precision guided munitions, robotics, etc. The revulsion felt towards excessive loss of human lives is the "new normal," and it is the commanders' responsibility to use economy of force to achieve the mission. However, casualty aversion can become a problem. In the Bosnia war, senior officers saw casualties as an indicator of the operation's failure and as a result, made force protection an imperative over restoring peace in the region. In the end, criminals were not pursued, community building projects forestalled and patrols cancelled because all these entailed sending in foot soldiers and endangering their lives.[17] Casualty aversion also underpins the desire of politicians to set timelines and formulate exit strategies that can imperil the mission.

Industrial Society vs. Information Society

Many parts of the world are progressing from an industrial to a networked or information society. An information society is one in which the production, diffusion and consumption of information dominates the cultural, economic and political spheres of life in the country.[18]

This shift from the tangible to the intangible forms the basis of economic and sociopolitical life and has pronounced repercussions on how victory is sought. In a state-on-state war, the Clausewitzian center of gravity may no longer be the material basis of the country, i.e. the capital cities and the industries, as was the case in the two world wars. This has shifted to the information

sphere, the media, and the hearts and minds of the populace. No doubt it will still be critical to target the infrastructure of the enemy, but destroying enemy infrastructure is less strategic in achieving victory than having decisive influence in the information domain.

One noteworthy aspect of this shift is the powerful use of social media tools by citizens around the world to amplify their efforts in opposing the state. The proliferation of image capturing devices empowers every person to become a potential security risk, intelligence gatherer and journalist. Everyone with a camera phone is able to capture and upload information to the internet and circulate it instantaneously throughout the world via online social networks such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. This poses immense challenges for governments. Recent examples testify to the impact of social media. The Iranian opposition, for example, managed to capture the world's attention by using mobile phones to capture atrocities committed by the Basij paramilitaries and the Republican Guard units. Most notable was the shooting of Neda Agha-Soltan, whose "martyrdom" for the opposition's cause was mobilized as a powerful rallying symbol for the green movement. Footage was widely circulated on the internet which provoked a global outcry against the Iranian establishment. Ethical misconduct, human rights abuses and atrocities can destroy any prospect of strategic victory even if the enemy is defeated.

Swift and Decisive?

U.S. forces achieved a swift and decisive win over the Iraqi army during Operation Iraqi Freedom. This win was proclaimed by the theatrics of then-President George W. Bush who landed on USS Kitty Hawk, declaring, "Mission

Accomplished." Retrospectively, no one today will still claim that it was victory at that point, for a bloody insurgency ensued and more U.S. servicemen were killed after that declaration on May 1, 2003, than during the initial advance.[19] The Iraq war hence elicits two cautionary notes for any leadership: one can "win the war but lose the peace;" and secondly, how one wins the war can determine whether one wins the peace.[20]

Both hybrid warfare and 4GW advocates agree that future wars will be slow, lengthy and cumbersome, as opposed to a clinical one like Operation Desert Storm.[21] One main reason for this is the post-conflict obligations imposed on the victor to rebuild a war-torn area lest it be-come a breeding ground for future troublemakers. Humanization of warfare has made it incumbent on the occupier/victor to rebuild what he has destroyed so that civilians can maintain their basic right to a decent living.

The concept of swift and decisive wars might be anachronistic, if not an anomaly in history. As one author argues, "statistically, this heuristic notion is clearly an anomaly, and historically, it may be nothing more than a grossly simplified recollection of some of those wars that disproportionately shape our understanding of the term."[22] Recent examples would be World War II and the first Gulf War. We can aim for a swift end to the war, but not the victory. For the victory to be decisive, it has to meet two conditions, according to scholar Michael Howard; "First, the defeated people must accept the fact of defeat and realize there

Photographer's Mate 3rd Class Juan E. Diaz

Mission Accomplished; celebrating the end of major combat operations and the end of the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, 2 May 2003 – but still a ways to go.

is no chance of reversing the verdict in the foreseeable future, whether by military revival, skillful diplomacy or international propaganda. Second, they must become reconciled to their defeat by being treated as partners in operating the new international order."[23]

Victory in Today's Context

Victory has become a shorthand and catchall term for many scholars and policmakers in describing positive outcomes in war.[24] This becomes problematic when we begin to confuse operational and tactical success with a victory that can serve the country's interests. It is more than just defeating our adversary on the battlefield. Not being clear about the kind of victory we want may result in catastrophic consequences for the country. The key point here is we need to do more than win the battles SAF potentially must fight.

What is Victory?

"It is no doubt a good thing to conquer on the field of battle … It needs greater wisdom and great skill to make use of victory."

– Polybius[25]

Victory in war is not merely about winning, to put it simply. Victory is based on an assessment – not a fact.[26] Therefore, there is a subjective element to it that depends on the perceptions of various actors such as the domestic and adversary populations, and the international and regional political leadership and community.[27] Nevertheless, this has to be buttressed by winning battles, which is objective because it involves pitting material against material – soldiers, platforms, and firepower against soldiers, platforms, and firepower.

Clausewitz said victory is tripartite and consists of three elements, namely; 1) the enemy's loss of material strength, 2) his loss of morale, and 3) his open admission of the above by giving up his intentions.[28] We can envisage victory as a continuum or sliding scale of outcomes, rather than as a simplistic binary of victory and defeat.[29] Or we may dissect victory into various levels – tactical, operational, and strategic – or as William Martel prefers: tactical, political-military, and grand strategic.[30] In Martel's encapsulation tactical success refers to what the military achieves on the battlefield while political-military encompass the change in the adversary's political behavior caused by the cumulative effect of many tactical wins. The last is a victory of "such magnitude that it leads to a profound reordering in the strategic foundations of international politics," when the "ideological and moral values of a society" are destroyed and "the foundations of the enemy state" are reestablished.[31]

J. Boone Bartholomees prescribes a toned down version of strategic victory (perhaps less grand compared to Martel's), saying, "Strategic victory in war is a positive assessment of the postwar political situation in terms of achievement and decisiveness that is acknowledged, sustainable, and resolves underlying political issues."[32]

The Victory SAF Should Aim For

Based on the discussion so far, this is what a SAF victory should look like.

■ The victory we should aim for should be akin to Martel's political-military and Bartholomees' definition of the strategic victory. There must be tactical and operational success, predicated on more tangible metrics

such as the amount of enemy territory seized, number of casualties and their loss of equipment. These are military objectives that underlay the foundation of victory.

■ Because of the information society we reside in, we need to manage interpretations of our war effort in order to generate victory. This pertains to perspective, and we need to target domestic and regional populations, as well as international political leaders through careful utilization of different media channels. This is the cognitive domain of war.

■ Humanization of warfare prohibits indiscriminate destruction of civilian lives and property (recall the international outcry against Israel's Operation Cast Lead in 2008). The war has to be ethical and right. This is the moral domain of war.

■ The peace that comes with the end of hostilities must be enduring and allow the successful rebuilding of affected areas. A picture of stability and hope is necessary for victory to be perceived.

■ We need to translate this victory into long-term political gains for the country.

The Conduct of War

As Rupert Smith argues in his seminal book, The Utility of Force, wars can no longer be won through the application of pure military force alone.[33] We as soldiers who stand at the tip of the spear must conduct the war in a manner that does not subvert the prospects of lasting peace.[34]

Tactical: As Lt. Col. Daniel Lasica argues, "the hybrid warrior seeks to quickly convert their tactical success and their enemy's mistakes into strategic effects through deliberate exploitation of the cognitive and moral domains. Hybrid war is a strategy and a tactic, a form of war and warfare."[35]

Online social media have become a powerful platform for citizen journalism in the current information society. One should expect this in any area of operations we are in. Soldiers need to be aware that the aggregation of their individual actions can have an impact on the perception of how the war is being fought. Disparate acts of inhumanity and atrocities recorded by civilians with camera phones and propagated on viral social networks abroad will paint a negative picture of our operations. This will taint whatever success we have in operations and affect the sense of victory.

This success thus depends on the values of our individual soldiers. Their ethical conduct in war towards enemy combatants and civilians in the pressure of war will contribute to the sense of victory, especially when perceived by the international community. On the other hand, tactical mistakes such as the air strike ordered by a German officer that killed 142 civilians in Afghanistan will certainly be exploited.[36]

Operational: Our conduct of media operations will be as crucial as our execution of battles on the ground. The media front will consist of traditional media and the new media – including, but not limited to Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. The same point made above can, in turn, be used against the enemy. Their mistakes and misconduct, if filmed or otherwise documented publicly, can be used against them. We should not leave the framing of the war effort to chance, and even less to our adversary. We should set the structure, tone and plot of the ongoing narrative in the public sphere, local and international.

For example, al-Jazeera's focus on broadcasting visceral images of suffering Iraqis and Palestinians decisively shapes public opinion in the Arab world, framing the message of a medieval crusade against the Muslim world. A narrative that paints our operations in a negative light will not help us in achieving a decisive victory. The challenge will be crafting a calibrated message that does not seem like propaganda and is yet sufficiently nuanced to persuade others to be on our side. Indeed the media is itself a weapon we must wield to our advantage.

An example of an operational failure would be the raid by Israeli commandos on a flotilla bound for Gaza.[37] The ostensible aim of the convoy was to bring aid to Gaza, but it really was trying to focus international attention on the Israeli blockade. The Israelis took the bait and launched an assault on it, oblivious to the filming of its actions by an al-Jazeera crew on board the ship. It did not matter that the crew on board used violence first. What the world saw was Israel's willingness to confront the flotilla with disproportionate force, regardless of its purpose. This incident shows how media shaped international public opinion and strengthened the hands of the activists. It also demonstrated Israel's failure to understand the larger, strategic context of the operation.

Stability operations involving the rebuilding of war-torn rear areas should start immediately as the frontline advances. We should take a leaf from the United States' failure in Iraq. We can leverage the strong interagency collaboration honed over the years through Singapore's organization of national day

IDF Naval Forces prepare to implement the Israeli government's decision to prevent the flotilla from breaching the maritime closure on the Gaza Strip. May 29, 2010.

parades, youth Olympics, etc., working with civilian agencies, and international non-governmental organizations to quickly bring aid, funds and material to rebuild areas that have been destroyed, as and when they have been stabilized.

The faster a semblance of stability can be established, the more difficult it will be for insurgents to take advantage and mount asymmetric warfare. Rebuilding should be carried out concomitantly as war proceeds, though we must anticipate that it will be a significant strain on finite resources. This can be mitigated by quickly engaging international aid agencies to facilitate recovery processes in rear areas. If swift stability can be brought to the affected civilian populace, it may also break the will of the insurgents to resist our forces, and may bring about sustained eventual victory. This is necessary to create enduring peace. Indeed rebuilding is our onus and unavoidable responsibility if victory is our aim.

Strategic – Creating the Right Political Conditions: Battlefield success alone does not determine the outcome of wars, but it does provide political opportunities for the victors.[38] Most importantly, military operations must be tempered with political tolerance and moderation so as to make defeat acceptable to the defeated. The waging of the war must take place in tandem with strict political control in order create the conditions for lasting peace. To win, one achieves his immediate political goals, but to be victorious one must resolve the underlying issues such as the motivations and the catalyst that led to war in the first place.[39]

Given this, we need to know what the political goals are and the military objectives must serve these goals.[40] However, the political goals cannot be too precisely defined, must be achievable and realistic, and yet leave enough ambiguity and broadness to permit a range of end states at the conclusion of the war. Being able to openly declare how we have achieved our goals is vital to the collective sense of victory.

We also need to understand the enemy's theory of victory, so as not to play our chess pieces into his hands. For example, Hezbollah in its 2006 conflict with Israel could claim victory merely by surviving the Israeli onslaught;[41] whereas the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) sought to recover Israel's kidnapped soldiers, destroy Hezbollah and kill its leader Hassan Nasrallah. The IDF failed in all three aims.[42] It was overly ambitious and the IDF set itself up for failure. Nasrallah certainly underestimated Israel's vehement response but turned the situation around by his skillful manipulation of the media.

Further, the defeated must accept the verdict, as their cooperation is necessary for success to be exploited.[43] World War II can be argued to be the continuation of the disastrous handling of World War I's aftermath by the Allies at Versailles, as the German people did not internalize their defeat and perceived the loss as a betrayal by their political leaders. Thus, open admission of defeat as stated in Clausewitz's trinity of victory cannot be limited only to the politicians but must include an admission by the people as well. If peace is the desired outcome and war is the aberration, then victory should lead to an enduring peaceful state. We ought to ask ourselves what are our post-conflict obligations. Should we be able to bring a swift end to hostilities, our active participation in post-war rebuilding will be crucial in securing our long-term political interests in having a friendly and prosperous partner. The temporal impermanence of

victory needs to be considered as it can easily and quickly be squandered.

Conclusion

We are in good stead to tackle these developments. The five aspects of SAF's total defense concept are prescient and far-sighted (military, civil, economic, social, and psychological).[44] They create a bulwark against a coherent and multi-pronged hybrid attack. Hypothetically, the adversary can commit terrorist attacks on our home soil while a larger scale war is fought on another front, in an attempt to erode the will of the population to fight. The adversary could also sow discord among racial and religious groups to compound the effect. This is where social and psychological defense play a crucial role in warding off such attacks.

We must continue to train soldiers to have well-anchored values, and commanders who are adaptive and flexible should remain one of our key foci. They must also be resilient to endure and face the uncertainties of the future battlefield.[45] They will face greater scrutiny on the battlefield as a result of the all-pervasive influence of traditional and new media. The emphasis on individual leadership becomes salient, as small units become more dispersed in urban fighting environments.

Indeed, changing technology and socio-political developments drive the way wars are fought and won. Hybridization and humanization of warfare affect how we conduct our war. Information societies have shifted the Clausewitzian center of gravity from the tangible to the immaterial, especially with the advent of social media. The cognitive and moral domains of war have superseded the importance of the tangible and material metrics that used to dominate military calculations. These developments require us to

re-examine our notions of victory, given its place in SAF's mission statement. A swift and decisive success on the battlefield must be achieved to translate to victory in a political and strategic sense. This is especially important for the post-combat phase, as perception of victory often depends on what happens in the aftermath. Ultimately this hard earned victory should lead to enduring rather than impermanent peace. **PRISM**

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