

Mechanised forces in asymmetrical forms of warfare history essay



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Oxford Dictionary defines Asymmetry as “ lack of symmetry” while others define it as “ not balanced or regularly arranged on opposite sides ie lacking equality and balance”. Asymmetry is evident when two adversaries differ in availability of resources or technology, leading to an imbalance. Many authors use this term in the same breath as guerilla warfare, terrorism and/or insurgency which to an extent are actually tactics which address the disadvantage occurring due to asymmetry. Any imbalance between two belligerents would force the one who is weaker to resort to alternate tactics and concepts in order to negate the conventional, organisational or technological superiority of the stronger of the two. The conflict thus breaks away from military boundaries and now encompasses other environments, typically physical, where now it may involve civilians. More often than not, the winnings accrue from winning over the people and their ‘ minds’ and by moulding opinions in own favour. Thus the tactics employed to achieve ‘ symmetry’ by the weaker actor do not follow set rules or positions and attempt to undermine the strength of the stronger adversary by exploiting his weakness and impacting him psychologically more than physically.

Asymmetric warfare is considered as a subset of the Fourth Generation Warfare and can take on any form including information operations, guerilla warfare, urban operations or low intensity conflict; all unorthodox, irregular form of operations only to achieve symmetry. The Indian State’s and mostly the Indian Army’s experience in combating this form of warfare is unique. Starting with the North-East insurgency, the IPKF imbroglio, ongoing low intensity conflict (LIC) in Jammu & Kashmir and the developing Left Wing extremism, our experience is tremendous. Having said so, it must be

admitted that in all this, the employment of mechanised forces has been restricted, except during the IPKF operations. Hence, the question of its relevance in such operations is bound to arise in our context.

Relevance of Mechanised Forces in Forms of Asymmetrical Warfare

Conventionally, the impact of mechanised force is synonymous with mobility, firepower and shock action. However, its employment in forms of asymmetrical warfare is under debate. Indian experience has not found much use of the mechanised elements except when absolutely necessary viz operations in Sri Lanka, Kashmir (Sopore) and Punjab (Golden Temple). This is more so drawn from the fact that utilisation of mechanised elements during internal security tasks raises the psychological level of conflict and draws un-necessary attention, both media and global. Further, impact of heavy armour and threat of collateral damage is inherent in employment of mechanised forces and hence its usage is deliberately restricted internally.

Evidently, the utility of mechanised forces in their present form is limited in Internal Security tasks. However, contingencies for the employment of mechanised forces by the Indian Army do exist and shall become a reality in the near future as the country finds itself a footing as a regional and economic superpower amongst the comity of nations which would thrust upon her enhanced international commitments and responsibilities. India would need to demonstrate its will and capability to employ and deploy its military component beyond its national borders and in increasing numbers. Some of these contingencies could be:-

- United Nations' mandated peacekeeping or peace-enforcement missions. Even today mechanised sub-units are operating as part of brigade groups in UN Peace-keeping duties.
- Out of Area Operations (OOAO). The main concept of OOAo envisages carrying out operations outside national boundaries either unilaterally or multilaterally towards fulfillment of military or political objectives. However, the obligations to undertake OOAo in the developing global environment would include maintaining regional stability and ensuring own national interests, wherein there may be occasions for military deployment in regional nations, independently or as part of regional alliance.
- As part of International Force in counter terrorist and counter insurgent operations.

Examples of utilization of mechanised forces abound outside especially the operations of Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), US Army in Iraq, Russians in Chechnya, etc. even our own experience and lessons learnt whilst employing mechanised forces as part of IPKF in Sri Lanka are valuable.

A SWOT analysis of the characteristics of a mechanised force would allow us to arrive at the best method of employment and thus the tactics required to be followed.

(PHOTO – SWOT ANALYSIS)

While there is no denying the fact that one of the major characteristics of armour ie mobility is severely hampered in such operations, the exploitation of the other characteristics offset this disadvantage.

- Firepower. The target acquisition and engagement ability of the armour allows it to deliver precision fire even in restricted terrain. This obviates the need of Air Support and thus avoids collateral damage. The availability of secondary armament in the form of a machine gun is a major advantage.
- Shock Action. The physical presence and arrival of armoured forces in the area of operations is a symbol of power and destructive capability. The physical presence of armoured troops provides a deterrent effect and lends to strike fear in opponents not similarly equipped.
- Armour Protection. This characteristic plays a major role in LIC operations and MOUT (Military Operations in Urban Terrain) wherein the small arms fire is negated effectively. However, weapons of the adversary may also include rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) which can be offset by additional protective systems like the explosive reactive armour (ERA) and operating techniques viz combined arms team.
- Flexibility. LICO and MOUT will involve small team operations with decentralized control. The tank or Infantry Combat Vehicle (ICV) are most suitable weapon platforms for leading such operations due to their inherent flexibility through communications and advanced battlefield management systems (BMS).

History has been replete with examples of mechanised employment in asymmetrical forms of warfare. Recent instances are the Russians in Chechnya, the Israeli experiences and the extensive use of mechanised units in Iraq. Let us very briefly analyse some of these experiences which may suggest the relevance of mechanised forces in such operations or otherwise.

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Russians in Chechnya

Russian invasion of Chechnya in December 1994 was a classical example of an asymmetrical battle in urban terrain between a conventional superpower versus the unorganized but highly motivated Chechen fighters. After failing to topple the anti-Russian regime in Chechnya through covert means, the Russians launched a major conventional effort to oust Djokar Dudayev, the renegade former Soviet Air Force officer who headed that separatist movement. While the Russian mechanised formations initially had some success driving the Chechens from the 'open areas' of northern Chechnya, their lack of a plan for the operations in the city of Grozny, led the Russians to adopt the strategy of driving an armoured column into the center of town and capture the main administrative buildings, on the assumption that serious resistance would then cease. The Russians suffered numerous casualties and were forced to withdraw. The resulting military disaster has become a classic case study of the folly of using massed armour without organizing combined arms teams, in an urban terrain.

The Israeli Experience

In response to the Hamas suicide bombing in Netanya, the Israelis launched OPERATION DEFENSIVE SHIELD (Intifada-II for the Palestinians) aimed to eliminating the safe havens of Hamas fighters in the refugee Camps. The Israeli Defense Forces' (IDF) attack on the Jenin Camp gives us major lessons in employment of mechanised forces in urban terrain while countering asymmetrical tactics. IDF used its mechanised forces in conjunction with infantry and Special Forces troops in combined arms teams. This allowed them to exploit the firepower, protection and shock effect of the armoured

sub-units. Mechanised columns were used to 'isolate' the Camp initially and then as part of combined arms teams, they were utilised to 'invest' and further assist the infantry in clearing the Camp. Lessons learnt by the Israelis make the tanks relevant in such operations albeit with certain modifications to the tactics and organisation.

US Army in Iraq

The extensive use of tanks by the US Army in its counter insurgency operations in Iraq firms in the relevance of mechanised units, especially in urban terrain. The US Army, after initial setbacks, changed tactics and started employing mutually supporting combined arms teams of tanks and infantry. The vulnerability of the armoured columns to insurgent tactics in urban terrain was offset by use of infantry in close support. Tanks were preferred over Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) due to the low survivability of the latter and the fact that risk of carrying troops in an APC was not worth the loss of lives. Commanders consider the intimidation and firepower of the Abrams a crucial tool for putting down the insurgents. When the Marines crushed insurgent-held Fallujah, they brought in two extra brigades of M1 Abrams tanks. The precision firepower, armour protection and ability to operate in small teams independently gave the commanders on ground the flexibility and reduced casualties and collateral damage.

(Photo : Abrams tank upgrade for urban operations)

It's "a dirty, close fight," says an article in *Armor*, the US Army's official magazine of tank warfare, by a group of officers led by Maj. Gen. Peter Chiarelli of the 1st Cavalry Division. "Be wary of eliminating or reducing ...

heavy armor" as the Army modernizes, the officers warn, arguing it is crucial
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against insurgents' " crude but effective weapons." " The M1 tank is still the platform of choice," says Colonel Russ Gold, a former commander in Iraq and chief of staff at the U. S. Army's Armor Center in Fort Knox, " Primarily it was the shock effect, and it provided a lot of protection. Before OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM, the Army had one vision for the future: ... the notion that a lighter, more mobile force would make armor obsolete. Now, the Army is recognizing that the tanks must be upgraded", he says, " so that their armor can be used even more effectively, especially in the cities".

IPKF in Sri Lanka

Not much has been written or analysed with regards to the employment of mechanised forces by the IPKF but the operations of the one armoured regiment that was employed is a pointer to certain tactical lessons for the future. In asymmetrical forms of warfare and especially in urban terrain, the primacy of infantry is established but the commanders generally have a tendency to restrict the use of armour as part of road opening or operating base security. Generally the trend in IPKF operations was to break down the tank troops into individual weapon platforms with them being placed in support of the infantry coy / platoon. This led to enhanced casualties due to the inadequate knowledge of Infantry Company / platoon commanders on employment of tanks and also enhanced the vulnerability of tanks. Another lesson was the vulnerability of a tank to the threat of IEDs and chemical energy weapon systems.

(Photo : T-72s damaged in IED blasts in IPKF)

Tactics of Employment

Tactics vary constantly with the situation especially when facing asymmetric challenges. Particularly, the urban terrain does force change in tactics and method of employment of mechanised units. Some of these have been discussed below.

- Employment of mechanised forces in isolation would be a retrograde step.

The success of the mechanised units as part of an integrated task force or combat team is obvious. A combined arms team consisting of elements of armour, infantry and engineers is a potent force for such operations. They are mutually supporting and can exploit the characteristics of each other.

- Command and control of ibid combined arms teams needs to be dwelled upon. The command of such teams must be bestowed upon the one most capable to exercise operational control over the others. It shall be extremely difficult for the infantry commander to exercise control over the armoured troop and the Engineers detachment and hence, the obvious choice is the armoured troop leader due to his effectiveness in controlling his troop as well as the Engineer detachment while the infantry provides the close-in protection and clearing tasks. Needless to say, communications and infantry-tank cooperation would require tremendous coordination.

- For effective mutual support, the US Army utilized the box or the diamond formation wherein several Armoured Fighting Vehicles (AFVs) were grouped together. Tactics employed was to position vehicles at the four points of the formation and advance using slow, coordinated forward movements allowing

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time to scan the areas that may be dominated by the enemy. When movement was halted, the AFVs took up positions on crossroads in order to provide better observation and coverage. At the Combat Group level, dispersion was maintained by employing several box formations moving in parallel through blocks or streets and coordinating their advance and firing sectors in order to reduce the chances of fratricide. This also enhanced the lateral security of the columns.

- Organisational changes may have to be resorted to in order to enhance the survivability in such asymmetrical conflicts. We presently follow the traditional four troops with each being a three tank troop while the squadron headquarters is equipped with two tanks. It may be prudent to re-organise the combat team prior to deployment in such operations, to only three troops in a squadron with each troop being a four tank troop. The second tank in the squadron headquarters be replaced with an ICV with command, control, communications, computers and intelligence (C4I systems) on board. A four tank troop has major advantages as the troop now can operate in two tank sections with inherent mutual support. This would also confirm to the recommended formation of employment.

In Iraq, the increasing demand for armoured units establishes the relevance and importance of mechanised units in asymmetrical conflicts especially fighting in built up areas (FIBUA), or as US Army would put it, MOUT. Another relevant thought process is the coercive impact of armoured units in such operations whereby, the armoured forces have been used as a visible symbol of power threatening the psychological domain of the adversary and impacting his morale.

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Conclusion

The Indian Army's experience in asymmetrical forms of warfare is well known albeit more infantry oriented being related to internal security. Our infantry units are now adept and do adapt accordingly. However, the mechanised forces have remained under utilized except for their employment during IPKF operations and as part of UN peace keeping duties. As evident, the mechanised forces have a major role to play in asymmetrical conflicts and MOUT and the experience of other armies, especially the Israelis and the US Army, has been encouraging. There is a need to study their operations and gain from their experience, in order to prepare ourselves and our troops for such asymmetrical conflicts in the future.

Even in conventional warfare there may be a need to re-invigorate the FIBUA technique of fighting, going by the fact that in developed terrain there may be a need to capture certain built up areas.