

RE-EVALUATING THE PRIMACY OF MORAL FACTORS IN MODERN WARFARE: IMPERATIVES FOR STRATEGY FORMULATION

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Abstract

There is a general tendency among scholars to view tangible material means of warfare as the primary determinants of strategic outcomes in armed conflicts. Contrary to this tendency, the empirical evidence suggests that, in warfare, the role of moral factors is more impactful than that of material resources. This study contends that, while material resources are not inconsequential, particularly in modern warfare, enduring success is rooted more in the moral standing of adversaries than their physical capabilities. Drawing upon various conceptual frameworks and historical evidence, the study claims that the main repository of military power is the moral dimensions of strategy, such as belief, conviction, steadfastness, willpower, leadership, and cohesion. Accordingly, it advocates the need to recalibrate priorities in the formulation of strategy and to increase emphasis on moral aspects in professional military education. The conceptual insights guiding this study have been taken from the Human Capital Theory and the Theory of Moral Ascendancy in Warfare, the latter being postulated herein.

Keywords: Material Resources, Moral Factors, Theory of Moral Ascendancy in Warfare, Primacy, Professional Military Education, Strategy Formulation, Strategic Outcomes, Warfare.

Introduction

Traditionally, military campaigns and operations are studied and analysed primarily through the lens of physical attributes of forces, such as comparative strength of troops, firepower, technologies, and logistics. As a result,

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material resources figure prominently in conventional strategic thought and planning in warfare. This is because material resources are quantifiable and constitute concrete evidence that is easy to comprehend and relate to different situations. However, historical evidence reveals that physical capabilities alone do not determine victory and that warfare actually involves a complex interplay between tangible material resources and moral factors encompassing a wide range of elements which together play a decisive role in shaping outcomes. While superiority of physical resources may perform a meaningful role in achieving tactical successes and winning battles, it is the moral fabric of a force that sustains enduring strategic victory. As a matter of fact, the impact of moral attributes of those who fight or support the war effort far outweighs that of material resources.¹ Therefore, prioritization of moral factors in planning for war and formulation of strategy is essential for both short-term effectiveness and long-term success. This argument underscores the need to recognize the true significance of moral factors in warfare and to align strategies, particularly military education and training systems, accordingly.

This paper explores the primacy of moral dimensions of strategy in warfare over its physical aspects through a conceptual and historical prism. The purpose is to comprehend the significance of moral dimensions by discussing the subject as a concept, and to identify the imperatives for strategy formulation. The quantitative aspect of the argument, wherever used, is merely for the sake of emphasis and not to validate its scientific connotations. The discourse is grounded in the theoretical framework of Human Capital Theory, validated by insights of renowned military thinkers and strategists, and further enriched by a novel conceptual construct, i.e., the Theory of Moral Ascendancy in Warfare, which is being postulated in the light of Qur'anic conception of warfare.

Defining Moral and Physical Dimensions of Strategy in Warfare

In both classical and contemporary understandings of warfare, the balance between moral and material factors in formulation of war strategies has been a subject of intense reflection. At the outset, it may be highlighted that moral and physical factors are not mutually exclusive; they are, rather, interdependent variables interacting constantly, often in asymmetrical ways.² Together they determine the strategic effectiveness of a military force, *albeit* in their unique ways. However, historical evidence suggests that the impact of moral factors in war is far more consequential than that of physical resources. Martin

Creveland goes to the extent of stating that the side which is morally stronger “will almost certainly win, regardless of the material balance.”³ This assertion challenges the mechanistic interpretations of military success and opens up a space for reassessing the impact of psychological, ideological, and emotional forces that are intangible and yet reinforce military performance in a tangible way. To understand moral dimensions of warfare, one must first grasp the taxonomy of physical factors, which have traditionally received the predominant focus of strategic thinking.

Physical Elements

These are the tangible material resources that constitute a military’s measurable power to prosecute war. These include, *inter alia*, manpower, combat platforms, weapon systems, arms inventories, defence budget, logistical capabilities, infrastructure, and technological innovation.⁴ Apparently, a well-equipped force with superiority in physical resources is expected to effectively project power, seize and defend spaces, and sustain military campaigns. Therefore, traditional military doctrines often prioritise physical resources because they are visible, quantifiable, and promise immediate advantage. As John Keegan explains, the physical organisation of an army and the tools it uses shape the conduct and outcome of combat meaningfully.⁵ Undeniably, the early victories of the US military in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 respectively were made possible by material, technological and logistical superiority. However, critical scrutiny shows that material superiority alone is not enough to guarantee long-term victory; to function effectively, a force requires a strong moral framework. Without animating will to endure hardship or belief in a cause, even a well-equipped army may experience internal disintegration or loss of will to fight. So, physical tools are effective only when wielded by a morally anchored, galvanizing, and animating force.⁶

Moral Factors

Moral factors, on the other hand, refer to the intangible attributes of a force that define its true potential and will to fight as an effective entity. The term ‘moral’ encompasses a range of ideological, psychological, and emotional factors that influence human attitudes in warfare and enable a force to fight with greater resilience, adapt under stress, and retain cohesion in adversity.⁷ Table 1 below contains a set of indispensable moral attributes categorised under four broad domains:

Table 1: Moral Factors in Warfare⁸

The Individual	The Unit	The Leadership	The Cause
• Belief System and Faith • Courage • Steadfastness • Resilience • Selflessness • Discipline	• Leadership • Cohesion • Morale • Will to Fight • Trust (Horizontal)	• Leadership (Competence and Character) • Initiative & Decentralised Command • Trust (Vertical)	• Cultural Narrative & Identity • Legitimacy • Conviction • Adaptability

These attributes are mutually reinforcing and collectively influence the moral fabric of forces engaged in warfare. At the core lies Belief (Faith) that in conjunction with other attributes gives deeper meaning to war as a human undertaking. Napoleon's famous dictum "moral is to physical as three to one" profoundly highlights the primacy of moral factors over material resources.⁹ More than a battlefield cliché, it is an apt recognition of significance of moral factors. It manifests the universal concept that moral attributes outweigh physical force in warfare and that the outcomes are more decisively shaped by intangible human qualities than by material resources. Metz and Millen aptly contend that compared to material superiority, such as numbers and technology, intangible moral attributes exert a greater influence on outcomes of wars.¹⁰

It is worth highlighting that the primacy of moral factors over physical resources is an enduring postulation which is valid for all types of warfare, including high-intensity conventional wars, hybrid wars, and low-intensity conflicts including insurgency, counter-insurgency, combating terrorism, etc. It is so because war constitutes a conflict of opposing wills in which the most crucial part, by far, is the human element with its classic manifestation in moral attributes.¹¹

It is also worth noting that the distinction between moral and physical dimensions is not binary but interactive. Whereas physical strength enables action, moral strength sustains it. According to Rupert Smith, material conditions are tools, but it is the moral that wields them – deciding the fate of war and shaping outcomes more decisively than material superiority alone.¹² Let us understand this notion from a conceptual lens.

Conceptual Framework

Human Capital Theory

Propounded by Gary Becker, this theory avers that the effectiveness of an organisation depends not only on its physical or material resources but also on the quality of its human elements, i.e., discipline, motivation, skills, and moral values.¹³ In the context of warfare, this theory implies that military forces endowed with superior moral power will outperform a materially stronger adversary. Becker notes that investment in human attributes yields greater returns than investments in physical capital.¹⁴ Therefore, it goes without saying that owing to their pivotal importance intangible human attributes are critical to success. This concept is equally valid for asymmetric and hybrid warfare. Human Capital Theory, thus, provides a suitable framework for understanding how moral strength functions as a form of capital which is crucial for strategic success.

Clausewitz's Insights

Clausewitz, through his seminal academic work titled "On War", offers a profound philosophical framework to understand war. Despite his visible emphasis on physical resources, he regards "moral forces" as crucial, and asserts that, though elusive and difficult to quantify, moral forces play a decisive role in success or failure of military undertakings. According to him, forces with superior moral attributes can endure hardships, maintain unity under stress, and outperform materially superior enemy.¹⁵ For Clausewitz, the fog of war, friction, and uncertainty demand moral clarity and resolve. Therefore, military success hinges not solely on superior material resources but on the leadership's ability to inspire, the soldiers' will to fight, and the public support for the war effort. When these moral components are strong, they can compensate for deficiencies in physical resources. He posits that in war "the physical seems little more than the wooden hilt, while the moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapon, the finely honed blade."¹⁶

Sun Tzu's Conception of Moral Law

Sun Tzu articulated a sophisticated understanding of moral forces in warfare. In *The Art of War*, one of the most influential treatises on warfare, Sun Tzu identifies "The Dao" or "Moral Law" as one of the constant factors of war alongside Heaven, Earth, the Commander, and Method. He posits, "The Moral Law causes the people to be in complete accord with their ruler, so that they will

follow him regardless of their lives, undismayed by any danger.”¹⁷ The Dao principle symbolises the imperative of moral alignment of leadership, government and people in pursuit of collective purpose. According to Sun Tzu, victory arises from the will of people unified under a leader who commands trust and moral authority, and not from material superiority alone. He further avers that the ability of a commander to align virtue, vision, and societal consensus is a decisive strategic asset and that moral disunity or illegitimacy causes internal dissent and vulnerability.¹⁸ Thus, while Clausewitz underscores the importance of moral forces within a Western context marked by rationalism, Sun Tzu’s concept of moral authority anchored in the Confucian paradigm of virtue and harmony serves as a foundational element for maintaining unity and legitimacy in warfare. Leadership development, organisational cohesion, ethical strength, and legitimacy are increasingly seen as imperative for “force readiness”.¹⁹ Many contemporary warfare doctrines, including that of NATO is a testament to the extraordinary impact of the moral dimensions of military strategy.

The Theory of Moral Ascendancy in Warfare

This theory is derived from the Qur’anic conception of warfare which underscores the primacy of moral dimensions of strategy over physical elements of warfare. However, before describing the theory itself, it is important to understand the basic philosophy of war given by the Qur’an. The philosophy is best encapsulated in the following verse of the Qur’an:

*“Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress. Indeed, Allah does not like transgressors.”*²⁰

This verse commands that war is to be prosecuted with the aim to enforce justice, eliminate oppression, and as a response to aggression (defence). It also emphasises proportionate use of force. Evidently, this philosophy is reflective of “humanist values”.²¹ It closely resembles the cardinal features of Just War theory propounded by Augustine and Aquinas.²² Likewise, the Qur’an and the Prophet’s traditions also prohibit the harming of non-combatants, destruction of crops, or abuse of prisoners which mirrors the Western doctrine of discrimination and proportionality.²³ As John Kelsay observes, Islamic laws of war are not just legal conditions but spiritual and moral imperatives that bind the believer to divine accountability.²⁴

The pinnacle of the Qur’anic doctrine of war, which establishes the primacy of moral factors, is contained in a striking verse that directly links success

to moral strength, independent of material considerations. As per the Qur'anic doctrine, the believers' edge lies not in weaponry or numbers but in faith (*Iman*), steadfastness, understanding, and divine alignment. The verse provides both a doctrinal formulation and a strategic directive that decrees that the moral dimension of strategy is to be treated as foundational and not supplementary. As opposed to classic military thinkers and strategists who view the impact of moral factors as three times that of physical resources, the Qur'an professes that the steadfast and morally fortified believers, with divine support, possess an advantage of ten-to-one. The Qur'an commands:

*"O Prophet, urge the believers to battle. If there are twenty [among] you who are steadfast, they will overcome two hundred. And if there are a hundred [of you], they will overcome a thousand of those who have disbelieved, because they are a people who do not understand."*²⁵

The verse of the Qur'an following the above-quoted verse, in recognition of human weakness and varying shades of moral strength, ordains that spiritually weaker and less resolute believers, with due divine support, hold an advantage over opponents at a diminished ratio of two-to-one. The Qur'an ordains:

*"Now Allah has lightened [the burden] for you, for He knows that among you is weakness. So if there are among you a hundred steadfast, they will overcome two hundred; and if there are a thousand [of you], they will overcome two thousand by permission of Allah. And Allah is with the steadfast."*²⁶

The Qur'anic concept of primacy of moral factors reflected in the above two verses is graphically depicted in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Effectiveness of Morally Resolute Believers

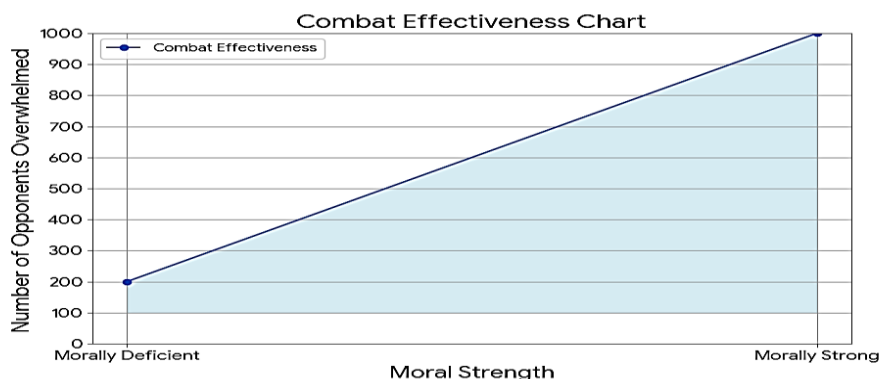


Figure 1 underscores a crucial conclusion regarding primacy of moral factors: if 100 morally strong believers, with complete divine support, can overwhelm 1000 opponents (assumed as 100% effectiveness), and 100 morally deficient or less resolute believers relying mainly on material resources can overwhelm 200 opponents, it implies that morally deficient or less resolute believers operate at only 20% effectiveness relative to the morally stronger group. This implies that, depending on the moral profile of a military force, its moral strength can multiply its combat power by up to five times.

Thus, the nascent Theory of Moral Ascendancy in Warfare postulates that 'the real combat potential of a military force is fundamentally shaped by its moral resolve, and not by comparative material elements alone, such as strength of manpower, firepower, technology, and logistics.

Depending upon the moral standing of a force, its moral strength acts as a force multiplier – creating synergistic effects and multiplying its effectiveness by a factor of 2 to 5.' *The greater the moral strength of a force, the higher the effectiveness of moral factors in overcoming material disadvantages and defeating an opponent in warfare. Likewise, the weaker the moral resolve of a force, the greater the relative advantage of opponent's material resources, diminishing the effectiveness of moral factors in warfare.* In sum, a morally resolute military force can achieve disproportionate outcomes against a materially stronger opponent.

Empirical Perspectives on Moral and Physical Determinants in Warfare

To comprehend the relative utility of moral and physical factors in warfare, let us explore some empirical evidence which can provide us with a concrete basis for evaluation. The most relevant cases in this context are the conflicts which were marked by asymmetry – where one side possessed superior physical resources while the other drew strength from belief, cohesion, and ideological primacy. The examples discussed in subsequent paragraphs serve as evidence of the truth that moral factors vastly outweigh physical resources in determining the course of conflict.²⁷

Vietnam War

The Vietnam War is one of the most vivid demonstrations of the primacy of moral factors over physical elements in warfare. The Vietnamese, with their moral strength, achieved decisive success while material capabilities heavily

favoured the opponent. The US, despite its overwhelming numerical and technological superiority, failed to realise its political objective. Marilyn Young argues that the Vietnamese derived strength from ideology, historical sense of justice, and national survival, which gave them psychological superiority.²⁸ North Vietnamese leaders, according to Young, mobilised powerful moral resources: nationalistic fervor, ideological commitment to communism, cultural defiance against colonialism, and extraordinary social cohesion. By framing the war as a struggle for national liberation, the North Vietnamese persuaded their populace to endure immense hardships and losses. In contrast, the American military power was undermined by a crisis of moral legitimacy; plagued by unclear strategic purpose, rising civilian casualties, and a growing perception at home and abroad that the war was unjust, its moral authority rapidly eroded. Andrew Bacevich posits that “The real war was the moral war, and that was the one the US could not win.”²⁹ A strong anti-war public sentiment within the US compounded operational difficulties and seriously fractured the political will necessary to sustain the war.³⁰

Napoleonic Campaigns

The prime cause of Napoleon's military victories was not solely his brilliant battlefield tactics and manoeuvres or superior technology; he had an exceptional ability to inspire his troops and cultivate intense loyalty in them and *esprit de corps*, which compensated for numerical disadvantages and gave him moral edge over his adversaries. The ascendancy so achieved was further fueled, especially in the early campaigns, by the ideals of the French Revolution, i.e. liberty, equality, and national pride.³¹ The moral cohesion of his armies enabled rapid mobilisation, operational daring, and deep commitment to the war effort. The limits of material capabilities devoid of requisite moral strength were particularly revealed in Napoleon's Russian campaign of 1812. Despite commanding one of the largest and best-equipped armies in history, the erosion of morale, combined with logistical overreach and harsh conditions, led to his catastrophic failure, illustrating that physical factors alone cannot sustain success in the absence of moral cohesion.³²

The US Campaign in Afghanistan

The US hasty retreat from Afghanistan in 2021 shows the enduring primacy of moral and ideological factors over superior material capabilities. Despite vast numerical and technological superiority, financial capacity, and global alliances, the US-led coalition and Afghan government collapsed rapidly.

According to Jonathan Schroden, the combined numerical superiority of the US-led coalition forces and Afghan security forces varied between 3:1 and 6:1.³³ The US defeat is attributed to a lack of moral legitimacy, weak national identity, and eroding will within the Afghan security forces and political leadership. Contrarily, the Taliban derived strength from unique commitment, ideological conviction, cohesion, clarity of purpose, and strategic patience. Antonio Giustozzi claims that the Taliban's resilience stemmed largely from their ability to maintain internal discipline and present themselves as an indigenous moral force.³⁴ Similarly, Carter Malkasian argues that the Taliban's Islamic identity gave them unrivaled psychological advantage.³⁵

Islamic Battles

The Battle of Badr (624 CE) is one of the most apt examples of how the impact of moral and spiritual factors outweighs that of material strength. Despite being outnumbered three to one, the Muslims triumphed due to their unwavering faith, discipline, unity, and trust in divine guidance. The Qur'an frames this victory as a result of divine support granted to a morally committed force: *"And already had Allah given you victory at Badr while you were few in number."*³⁶ According to Montgomery Watt, the Muslims faced a numerical disadvantage of 1:3.2 (313:1000), but in terms of equipment, cavalry and armour, the Quraysh advantage was about 5.³⁷ The Muslims' cohesion and belief in the justness of their cause gave them the psychological resilience and courage needed to overcome material disadvantages.³⁸ A similar outcome occurred at the Battle of Yarmouk (636 CE), where materially inferior Muslim forces defeated the Byzantines through superior morale, leadership, and purpose.³⁹ These early campaigns reflect the Qur'anic emphasis that belief, steadfastness, unity, and moral conviction are more consequential in warfare than numbers or weapons.

The pattern revealed by these examples reaffirms that wars are won not by numerical and technological superiority but by moral strength and that moral forces, when aligned with physical capabilities, have the capacity to produce decisive outcomes. Conversely, when moral resolve and cohesion weaken, even the most formidable arsenals cannot achieve victory.

The Efficacy of Moral Factors in Modern Warfare

Some strategists speculate that, with the advent of niche military technologies, particularly autonomous and unmanned systems and cyber warfare, human involvement in future warfare is likely to diminish, which will reduce the

relevance of moral factors significantly. According to Andrew Herr, this assumption is unrealistic and overlooks the enduring centrality of human judgment, will, and moral cohesion in conflict outcomes.⁴⁰ Given the evolving forms of warfare characterised by hybrid, cyber, and cognitive warfare, the battlespace has expanded beyond the realms of terrain and hardware. The new constituents of warfare, i.e., perceptions, resolve, and societal cohesion, render the moral dimensions of strategy even more relevant. There is no denying the fact that cyber warfare, psychological operations, and information manipulation can trigger disruption, influence perceptions, cause demoralisation, and galvanise public opinion.⁴¹ Disinformation campaigns, in particular, can be used to erode the moral cohesion of societies by spreading doubt and distrust. At the same time, the ability to control the narrative through strategic communication, social media engagement, and public diplomacy has become a vital tool to achieve moral ascendancy.⁴² In sum, cognitive warfare explicitly targets decision-making capacity and willpower. Thus, the moral domain has actually broadened to encompass cognitive and emotional terrains influenced by real-time information flows. As Rupert Smith notes, “modern war is not about high-intensity combat between massed armies; it is about conflicts among the people, where legitimacy and perceptions determine success.”⁴³

Accordingly, military doctrines of the developed world increasingly recognise the centrality of moral robustness and psychological endurance. In hybrid warfare scenarios, non-kinetic means – economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, media framing – can achieve strategic effects earlier associated with conventional military force. Therefore, while disruptive technologies and unmanned platforms have significantly enhanced the effectiveness of non-contact warfare, they have not rendered human involvement obsolete. On the contrary, moral factors are likely to become even more decisive in shaping conflict outcomes.

Will Physical Resources Become Inconsequential in Future Warfare?

There is no denying the fact that, throughout history, physical factors have formed the bedrock of military power and are often viewed as decisive tools of warfare. The rationale is evident: war is a contest of violent forces, and the side with superior material capabilities should logically prevail. Undeniably, from the Roman legions using primitive means of warfare to contemporary military forces employing precision munitions, physical power has been shaping tactical

outcomes. It can, therefore, be argued that no matter how inspired a force may be, without adequate superiority in relative strength, weapons, mobility and logistics, it cannot sustain itself or achieve victory.

This view is endorsed by many classical military theorists. For example, Clausewitz terms war as “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will,” and in that regard views physical force as “the means of war” which obviously reflects his emphasis on material capabilities.⁴⁴ In the contemporary environment, superiority of firepower, surveillance and cyber capabilities can definitively yield operational advantage. The US-led campaign in Iraq and the initial phase of War in Afghanistan, as discussed earlier, are vivid examples of how superiority of firepower and technological means could topple regimes within weeks.

However, this argument collapses under historical scrutiny. The outcomes of many recent armed conflicts bear testimony to the fact that physical means have their limits. They may win battles but, on their own, they cannot secure long-term strategic success. A striking example is the US military failure in Vietnam despite its unmatched military power. Another example is the Soviet Union’s failure in Afghanistan, where the former’s material superiority was defeated by a highly motivated and ideologically driven competitor.⁴⁵ More recently, the US and its allies, with their advanced military arsenal, could not prevent the Taliban’s return to power in 2021. The conclusion is simple: material superiority without a strong moral foundation is insufficient for strategic victory.⁴⁶

It leads us to the conclusion that physical strength is not autonomous; it requires moral strength and purpose to be effective. Physical means of warfare are necessary for success but not independently decisive. They constitute prominent tools of violence but require the will and wisdom to wield them effectively. Whereas a force equipped with superior technology but deficient in moral attributes is vulnerable to collapse, a materially weaker force grounded in belief, cohesion and legitimacy can overwhelm a physically superior antagonist. Clausewitz, despite his emphasis on physical means, acknowledges that “moral elements are among the most important in war.”⁴⁷

Imperatives for Strategy Formulation including Military Education and Training

Our discourse suggests that warfare requires forces that are morally grounded, psychologically resilient and culturally robust. The future conflict

environment with all its complexities would demand this sort of preparedness equally intensely warranting investment in moral capital of human resource. For Pakistan, this imperative becomes even more crucial owing to its force differential vis-à-vis archrival India. We need to take guidance from Clausewitz who says “Military activity is never directed against material force alone; it is always aimed simultaneously at the moral forces which give it life, and the two cannot be separated.”⁴⁸ On the contrary, our existing Professional Military Education (PME) and training system is structured to lay primary emphasis on physical and kinetic dimensions of warfare – firepower, manoeuvre, and logistics – while offering limited or no engagement with moral and psychological dimensions of strategy.

Accordingly, our PME and leadership training system must aim at the development of, alongside competencies related to material capabilities, character, ethics, and critical thinking as a central feature, and not as peripheral content. The ultimate purpose should be to strengthen both moral and material foundations of military forces and equip rank and file to fight and lead with wisdom, devotion, and resilience. In this context, Moral Ascendancy Theory provides a philosophical paradigm which views combat power as a function of inner moral strength more than the external physical means. For apt operationalisation of this imperative, the major recommendations for formulation and implementation of strategy, particularly for PME and training system, are: one, PME should aim at cultivating and nurturing moral attributes, such as belief system, conviction, ideological coherence, cohesion, discipline, and emotional resilience across the board; two, align military conduct with higher values and Just War principles; three, accord higher priority to development of inspirational leadership over tactical and technical competency in both selection criteria and training programs; four, prepare forces to navigate environment of resource-constraints and psychological stress, and strengthen decision-making ability in ambiguous situations.

Conclusion

The evolving transformation of the character of war due to technological advancements notwithstanding, warfare fundamentally remains a clash of opposing human wills, with the main determinants of military success continuing to reside in human attributes. Therefore, moral dimensions of strategy retain enduring primacy over physical means of warfare. Accordingly, the temptation to prioritise ‘hardware’ over ‘software’ must be resisted. The need to accord due recognition to moral considerations in the process of planning and preparation for

war is not merely an academic imperative but a logical necessity. As a matter of fact, as contemporary warfare increasingly embraces cyber and cognitive domains, the significance of moral factors gets amplified instead of being diminished. Therefore, cultivating and leveraging moral dimensions of strategy in warfare remains central to strategic success. The guiding motto that needs to be adopted by armed forces is: *Moral advantage far outweighs material strength.*

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