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Can Asians Fight?

By Ahmed S Hashim

Synopsis

Asian powers have been spending a considerable amount of money on the latest generation weapons. The question then arises: can Asians fight? Yes, they have proven that they can but at the more complex types of warfare, the answer is open to question.

Commentary

ASIANS HAVE proven to be adept at fighting wars along most of the spectrum of violence. They fielded impressive armies in large-scale wars against each other. In the early 19th century when they faced Western commercial and military incursions into their territories, some Asian powers were able to field regular or conventional military forces that, on paper, were on a par with those of their Western co-belligerents, even in military technology.

Western militaries invariably won because they were better organised and more disciplined. Their armies fought as cohesive units, while Asians fought as 'heroic warriors.'

Asian Fighting Power in History

From the mid-19th century onwards, Western armies fielded more advanced military technologies that Asian powers were unable to compete with. China's *self-strengthening movement* to modernise China's military fell victim to the almost insolvable fiscal and bureaucratic crises of the Qing dynasty; thus showing clearly the link between levels of development in society and military power. Only Japan succeeded in fielding military capabilities that emulated the West. They put that capability to good use in defeating China and then Tsarist Russia.

Asians became formidable guerrilla fighters when faced with stronger opponents. Faced with almost insurmountable Western conventional military power in the early half of the 20th century, Asians realised that meeting Westerners in direct symmetric force-on-force encounters was a sure way to defeat. Another way had to be found. It is a misconception that the Asian way to victory in the first half of the 20th century was an example of guerrilla warfare defeating Western powers.

The greatest practitioners of the modern Asian way of war in the fight to achieve independence from colonialism, namely, Mao Zedong and Lin Biao in China, Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap and Truong Chinh in Vietnam and Abdul Haris Nasution in Indonesia, created a new form of warfare: people's revolutionary war. It was based on the following premises:

- a) Total national mobilisation of the population around a motivational ideology. Asians had not been able to do this in the 19th century due to lack of organisation;
- b) The enemy has strengths and weaknesses and the weaker side has strengths and weaknesses. The weaker side must apply its strengths against the weaknesses of the stronger side and avoid his strengths at all costs;
- c) The enemy wishes to shorten the war and it wages a costly capital-intensive war. The weaker side must prolong the war and exhaust its enemy;
- d) Guerrilla war is a stage along the way to creating a regular or conventional force structure to defeat the enemy. None of the theoreticians and practitioners of people's revolutionary wars ever argued that guerrilla warfare alone will beat the stronger side.

Low-tech to Hi-tech Warfare: Are Asians Up to It?

In the post-independence era a number of Asian powers fought regular conventional wars against one another. Some of these were large-scale encounters such as those between India and Pakistan or between India and China or Vietnam and China. In the 1950s these powers were armed with simple conventional weapons from the West and the Soviet Union only too eager to unburden themselves of World War II equipment.

In those encounters, Asian powers were tactically proficient in small-unit exchanges, but woefully unprepared for operational art, which involved the complex movement of large units in the theatre of operations. In the 1960s and 1970s the acquisition of more sophisticated weapons exposed further weaknesses in operational art.

This inadequacy was compounded by failure to execute combined arms. Combined arms is the ability to use all the combat arms – infantry, armour, and artillery – in an integrated manner on the battlefield to achieve effects that are greater than the sum of their parts. The reasons for failure were many: the combat arms did not train or exercise together; commanders were not educated or trained in combined arms; some combat arms, invariably infantry, dominated the combat arms while other arms

were poorly developed; terrain as in the mountainous region between India and China did not permit effective implementation of combined arms.

Arms Race or Jointness?

In recent years a number of Asian countries have rearmed themselves with hi-tech weaponry. The acquisitions have been of such a scale that observers have talked about the existence of a number of arms races across the continent. Disputes between many Asian countries are quite serious. Will Asian powers be able to wage hi-tech wars should conflicts escalate to outright war?

There is no easy answer to this question. First, no hi-tech war has broken out yet to gauge the respective capabilities. Second, hi-tech war will require a high level of socio-economic development to be able to field the needed personnel and to avoid reliance on suppliers of the most advanced weapons. Third, many of the Asian acquisitions have been in the naval and aerial services. It is not clear that most Asian powers have mastered aerial and naval warfare.

Outside of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, the most formidable navy in Asia is that of Japan, which has a solid reputation drawn from its historical ancestor, the Imperial Japanese Navy, from frequent training exercises and cooperation with the USN, and from fielding some lethal naval platforms.

Fourth, hi-tech conventional war will require joint warfare to be effective. Jointness refers to the ability of the different services operating together effectively where the armed forces “train as a team, fight as a team, and win as a team.” Jointness is the opposite of the organic approach where each service organises for war independently of its sister services and this is often reflected in training exercises. The major Asian powers recognise the need for jointness.

It is not clear that it has been achieved: India talks a lot about jointness but its armed forces are not joint. Despite the impressive growth and development of the People’s Liberation Army, it still suffers from significant weaknesses. It has conducted joint (*‘lian he’*) service exercises over the past several years, but the exercises are often heavily scripted and there are questions as to whether these exercises are really joint.

Asians most assuredly can fight, but better and higher levels of military technology will not be the best indicator or the guarantor of ability to fight effectively.

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