

Overcoming the Military Balance Mind Set

In our contemporary world, power politics dominates international relations and this has given undue prominence to the concept of military balance in determining relations between states. Both peace and war are decided as a function of military balance amongst states. Equitable distribution of military power amongst state actors produces peace, while any imbalance leads to war. Subsequently, excessive attention is directed towards understanding the conventional and non-conventional (Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)) military capabilities of allies and adversaries. Even political outcomes driven by diplomacy are rooted in judiciously calibrating the military power of state actors—in case of inter-state relations—and non-state actors, where intra-state conflicts exist. This mindset underpins much of the thinking on international affairs. American efforts to force North Korea to renounce nuclear weapons and Russian endeavors to resume talks between Assad's regime and the Syrian opposition epitomize this mentality.

Predictably, great powers possess enormous weight in shaping military balance between states and defining the overall power distribution in different regions to preserve peace. This is accomplished through arms deals, military pacts and military actions via deterrence (threaten punishment to change an actor's behaviour) and compellence (actor changes negative behaviour after receiving punishment). Since 1945, great powers— America, Russia, Britain, France and China to some degree— have imposed the military balance on developing states as a means to safeguard their interests.

Direct interference of great powers in developing states has meant that military institutions have become enamored with reliance on foreigners to redress military superiority of adversarial states. In the Middle East, Arab states find it inconceivable to confront the military superiority of the Jewish entity without military assistance from the US. Likewise, the Pakistani military does not believe it could win a full-scale conventional war against India's superior conventional forces unless America or China offer military and financial support to even the odds.

In the Islamic world, military institutions find it extremely problematic to think outside the confines of the military balance paradigm. This renders them easy pray for great powers to expand their sphere of influence. The defeat of the Arabs during the "Arab-Israeli" wars and the loss of East Pakistan (Bangladesh) in war with India extended America's influence in the Middle East and the Sub-continent. Even when Islamic countries fought each other like the Iran-Iraq war in the eighties, it was hard to break free from this equation. Under Western auspices, Iran and Iraq acquired weapons from great powers and fought each other to exhaustion. When Britain and America realized they could no longer outwit each other on the battlefield— military power parity was restored—only then did Iraq and Iraq stop the war.

Unfortunately, such wars have permanently institutionalized the concept of military balance in the mindset of the Muslim armed forces, which continues to fuel a vicious arms race today, and in doing so cements Western hegemony. Consider Saudi Arabia and the UAE spending billions of dollars to purchase Western arms and bolster their military assets to stymie Iranian meddling in the region. Unless the militaries in Islamic countries shift perspective away from the concept of military balance, their people will continue to suffer needless wars and increasingly the public will view their militaries as instruments of great power politics.

If the Islamic world wants to break free from great power domination, its military institutions must embark on a radical de-culturing programme, which reconnects Muslim military officers with the military culture of the past Islamic state. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate why military balance is not immutable and how the Islamic world can upend the hegemony of great powers.

The origins of military balance

The concept of military balance originates from the balance of power theory, which in turn derives its identity from the Westphalian nation state model conceived in 1648. Realism, a well-known school of Western political thought has popularized balance of power theory and its adherents today are called neorealists. According to realism, whenever the balance of power between states is disturbed, inter-state wars occur to minimise insecurity. The number of great power participants determines the scale and magnitude of the conflict. Neorealists have sought to widen the scope of this theory from its European context to cover great powers of the past.

Neorealists believe that the world is in a permanent state of chaos, and nation-states are responsible for their own security. Naturally, some states are stronger than other states, and this produces security vulnerabilities for weaker states. Such states can overcome their insecurity either by “internal balancing” or through “external balancing”.

Internal balancing requires states to exploit the resources at their disposal, and establish strong economies and militaries capable of thwarting belligerent states. Initially, America and the Soviets applied internal balancing to reinforce their military power (conventional and nuclear) to offset each other. This is likely to prove difficult for states that are not endowed with natural resources and do not know how to build strong militaries. Such states rely on external balancing to meet their security needs and form alliances with powerful states. Countries like Japan, Australia, and South Korea depend on security alliances with America to compensate for the security imbalance with China.

Under the balance of power system, peace or equilibrium only exists if the distribution of power among states—through the combination of internal and external balancing—is equal. In other words, the chances of peace rise only when the costs of war rise in relation to possible gains. The true custodians of the balance of power system are great powers that use their influence to maintain equilibrium in different parts of the world. Russia maintains the balance of power in Central Asia, while the US keeps the equilibrium in the Americas and elsewhere like Europe and the Middle East, where it is known as the external balancer (outside power to the region).

The balance of power system is disturbed when one state or a group of states act to increase their power relative to the power of other states. The remaining states will act to restore equilibrium by engaging the hostile state or states. As competition between great powers never ceases, the propensity for large-scale interstate conflict is expected. It took several coalitions of great European powers to defeat France under the leadership of Napoleon from 1799 to 1815. Likewise, an alliance of great powers acted to restrain Germany, when it sought to upend Europe’s balance of power during WWI and WWII.

Two strands of realism dominate thinking on balance of power. Defensive realism maintains that the state should possess enough power to defend its security and ward off aggressive states. This line of thinking eschews global domination by a single power and favors a bipolar world in which two powers of roughly equal power magnitude keep world peace. Its adherents often cite the bipolar order of the cold war that existed between the US and the Soviets as the ideal example. Offensive realism, on the other hand, maintains that a state can never become secure until it governs the whole world, thereby minimizing the ability of other great powers to contest its position. Proponents of offensive realism place great emphasis on a unipolar world, as the best way to preserve peace and security. The present power trajectory of America in world politics carefully follows this path.

Another theory that seeks to describe the probability of war and peace between great powers is the power transition theory. Unlike the balance of power theory, this theory argues that imbalance in power amongst great powers, especially the leading state and the dissatisfied state (challenger), produces stability, whereas equal distribution of power or near parity in power between the leading state and the dissatisfied state is likely to produce conflict. The probability of conflict increases when the power of the dissatisfied state

approximates the power of the leading state. Advocates of this theory predict that war between America and China is inevitable, as China grows in strength and reaches parity in power with the US.

Both of these theories stress the importance of studying the military might of states to detect changes in the power distribution that may affect the viability of the balance of power system or an increase in strength of the challenger state that may result in displacement of the leading state. Hence, tremendous scrutiny is paid towards studying military expenditure, military hardware and weapons, military pacts, military exercises and the acquisition of weapons through purchases either from great powers or through indigenous military inventions.

How the Islamic State defied the military balance logic

Two great powers and their proxies surrounded Arabia at the time of the Messenger of Allah (saw) Romans (Eastern Roman Empire commonly known as Byzantine) played the leading state and the Persian Empire was its rival. Both powers had Arab tribes as surrogates along the gulf coast and in parts of Levant. Abyssinia was a vassal state of Byzantine and Yemen was under Persia's sphere of influence.

Two important trade routes crossed the Arabian Peninsula. The first trade route, called the Eastern route, ran alongside the Persian Gulf, traversed Iraq then Syria and ended in Palestine. The second trade route, known as the Western route, loped along the shoreline of the red sea. The Romans and the Persians empires often vied with each other to control these trade routes. Furthermore, the trade routes made the people of Makkah powerful, especially the tribe of Quraysh, which deeply profited from the caravans and the pilgrims paying homage to idols housed in the Kaba. Other than the trade routes, neither the Romans nor Persians showed any interest in establishing a firm foothold in the Arabian Peninsula. To these great powers, Arabia was simply an inhospitable backwater territory not worthy of conquest.

The spectacular rise of Islam in Arabia not only gave birth to a new civilization, it also produced astonishing military victories. The Islamic state emerged victorious in its first military engagement with the mighty Quraysh at Badr. The triumph was even more surprising because the Muslim forces were poorly equipped, outnumbered 3:1, and only had two horses compared to Quraysh's 175. The superiority of Quraysh did not overwhelm the messenger of Allah (saw) and nor did he (saw) seek an alliance with other tribes in the Arabian Peninsula to balance the terms of the engagement.

Another great victory was in the Battle of the Trench fought in the year 627 AD. This time, Quraysh and its allies, consisting of several Arab and Jewish tribes, besieged Madina with 10,000 men. The Islamic state with its sole Arab ally Bani Qas could only muster 3000 fighters. In spite of the disparity in military power, the Islamic state successfully defeated the confederates without needing to enter into pacts with domestic or foreign powers.

On the domestic front, the greatest triumph by Muslims over Quraysh did not result from another military encounter. On the contrary, it was diplomatic conquest accomplished through the Treaty of Hudaibiya signed between Quraysh and the Islamic state in 628 AD. Though the battle of the Trench damaged Quraysh's prestige, it did not upend the power base of Quraysh in Arabia. The Jewish tribe Banu Khayber, situated north of Madina, and Quraysh in the South were allies as well as committed foes of the Islamic state. The probability of sandwiching the nascent Islamic state was a real threat, which had to be neutralized. Within this political context, the messenger of Allah (saw) contemplated splitting the Quraysh's power base in Arabia by making it impossible for them to come to Banu Khayber's aid, and the treaty provided the perfect platform to achieve this goal.

Regarding foreign powers, the messenger of Allah (saw) marched with 30,000 men in the campaign of Tabuk to confront the Roman Empire in 630 AD. The imbalance in power between the two states was enormous to say the least. In comparison to the might of the Roman Empire, the emergent Islamic state scored poorly in every conceivable area.

Byzantine's expansive territories and nations under its dominion dwarfed the boundaries of the Islamic state. The fledgling Islamic state of Madina was only able to impose order on the Arabian Peninsula, while the superior military of the Roman Empire not only fought battles but also imposed order on different parts of the world. The Islamic state's ability to finance wars paled into insignificance when measured against wealth of the Roman Empire and its capacity to raise taxes from multiple nations to wage wars.

In all of these examples, the Islamic state under the leadership of messenger of Allah (saw) defied the balance of power logic, engaged its adversaries on unequal terms and prevailed. The disregard for the balance of power concept continued under the Rashidun Caliphate. The Islamic State under the leadership of Abu Bakr and later Omar bin Al Khattab engaged both the Romans and Persian Empires simultaneously—making mockery of the external balancing logic that mandates the Islamic state to ally with either the Romans or the Persian in order to confront either one of them, nor did the Islamic state pay heed to the concept of military balance. In the Battle of Yarmouk in the year 636 CE, 46,000 Muslims faced 200,000 Romans, and triumphed. Furthermore, the Islamic state also undermined the precepts of the power transition theory by conducting wars against Romans and Persians without attaining near parity in power.

Blind adherence to these ideas also shields military officers from understanding the international situation as well as the minutest political details, which can give weight to specific diplomatic and military tactics and snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. For instance, the messenger of Allah (saw) was fully aware about the importance of neutralizing banu Khayber, as the Romans were searching for a foothold in Arabia to counter the growing power of the Islamic state. Hence, within fifteen days of signing the treaty of Hdaybiya, Banu Khayber was under siege by Muslim forces. Similarly, the messenger of Allah (saw) and his companions had been following diligently the protracted war between the Romans and Persians (602-628 CE), which lasted for a period of 26 years. Hence, despite military superiority of both great powers, the Muslims understood that the armies of their adversaries were worn out, morale for warfare was poor, and the crumbling international order was for ready for change.

Muslim armies under the Umayyids, Abbasids and the Ottomans did not abandon this Islamic culture of military warfare until the dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate and the creation of nation states by the European colonialist powers. Today, it is incumbent upon the Muslim armies of the Islamic lands to break their bonds with the concept of military balance and pledge their allegiance to the Sunnah of the messenger of Allah (saw) in fighting the enemies of Islam. Allah (swt) says:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِن تَنْصُرُوا اللَّهَ يَنْصُرْكُمْ وَيُثَبِّتْ أَقْدَامَكُمْ﴾

“O you who believe! If you will aid (the cause of) Allah, He will aid you, and plant your feet firmly.” [TMQ: 47:7]

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