



## Tanks in Modern Battlefield; Is the King Dead?

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### Abstract

Amidst the changing nature of warfare, many new concepts have been introduced in the modern military doctrines and simultaneously, many concepts have also become obsolete, rather irrelevant. In this context, many military weapons and war machines have undergone a process of evolution and change. Tanks, the king of battlefield, have been under the grunt of military strategists ever since the emergence of counterinsurgency operations and unconventional warfare. Being subjected to different interpretations, the role of tanks, particularly MBTs, in the modern battlefield has become questionable. This ambiguous nature of their relevance is evident from the fact that on one hand US Marines are getting rid of their active duty tanks and on the other hand Ukraine had been demanding more tanks from allied nations to counter Russia in the current Russian-Ukrainian war. Considering this paradox, in this paper we will explore the contemporary trends in the role of tanks by using different case studies over the last 60 years of counter-insurgency unconventional operations.

**Keywords:** Tanks; Battlefield; Weapons; Artillery; Air support

### Introduction

World war I is said to be the era when the 'King of Battlefield' was actually born. As a response to the challenge of trench warfare in WWI, tanks were introduced as 'armored fighting vehicles.' By WWII, with improvement and advancement in the designs of these armored vehicles, they became a mainstay of ground forces; thus, gaining the title of 'King of Battlefield'. In the consequent years, the relevance and dominance of tanks has been quite certain and definite. However, after the emergence of asymmetric enemies, development of anti-tank weapons and the start of counterinsurgency operations, the dominant role of tanks has become a point of contention among the military strategists [1].

### Hypothesis

The significance and relevance of any war instrument cannot be generalized; rather it depends on numerous related factors, particularly the nature of enemy and the operations that are to be carried out. The

relevance of MBTs has relatively decreased over the time; however, their role is still quite significant and effective, if employed efficiently through a combined arms maneuver strategy.

### Variables

In order to analyze the role of tanks in the modern battlefield, we will be considering different variables. The role and effectiveness of Tanks will be considered as a dependent variable which will be analyzed against different independent variables in the relevant case studies; nature of enemy, nature of military operations, terrain, tactical and operational strategies are some of the important influential variables.

### Literature Review

#### Theoretical framework

**Conservative vs. Revisionist debate:** In order to address the question of employing and utilizing tanks in the modern battlefield, we will make use of the conservative vs. revisionist debates regarding the structure of a particular military force. According to this debate, the conservative school implies that the technological changes do not impact the character of war. Conservatives declare war as a 'fundamental battle of wills' and in this context, they claim that employing too much technology in warfare mitigates the key lessons taught by military history. In a nutshell, this school of thought insists that armies must develop conventional capabilities to destroy the enemy and thus they claim that the role of tanks will always be relevant. However, the revisionist school of thought focuses mainly on low intensity conflicts of unconventional nature. In this context, the proponents of this school of thought insist that militaries must focus on developing their unconventional capabilities, mainly by the use of modern technologies [2]. In a nutshell, they claim that the tanks, not expeditionary in nature, are no more useful and impactful on the modern battlefield. The debate between these schools of thoughts is necessary to analyze the reality of Tank's impact in the modern battlefield.

**Concept of hybrid threat:** Another important theoretical aspect considered in this regard is that of 'Hybrid Threat'. This concept has actually redefined the modern enemy of states as:

"State sponsored, moderately trained, disciplined and organized into moderately sized formations (up to battalion); employing the same weapons as irregular adversaries, but with standoff capabilities such as anti-tank guided missiles, man portable air defense systems and longer range rockets; and conducting semi-centralized command and control by multiple means."

This evolved nature of enemy eventually impacts the character of war which consequentially influences the war machines that are to be employed and the strategies that are to be devised. So, in order to assess the relevance of tanks in modern era, we have to consider this evolved concept of modern hybrid adversary.

**Concept of combined arms maneuver:** The most important concept that will outline our analysis is the concept of Combined Arms Maneuver. This concept is defined in the US Army Doctrine as:

"Application of the elements of combat power in unified action to defeat enemy ground forces; to seize, occupy and defend land areas;

and to achieve physical, temporal and psychological advantages over the enemy to seize and exploit the initiative.”

An American military historian, Jonathan M. House has also aptly described combined arms maneuver theory as:

“Basic idea that different combat arms and weapons systems must be used in concert to maximize the survival and combat effectiveness of the others.

In order to analyze the role of tanks in modern battlefield, this theory of combined arms maneuver will provide us with the deepest insight as to how tanks can prove to be useful when used in alliance with other combat arms [3].

**Soviet concept of deep battle:** Soviet concept of deep battle is derived from this theory of CAM and most importantly it is the foundational stone of the concept of CAM doctrine of US military. Soviets introduced and employed this strategic concept prior to 1937 and according to this concept, with the help of artillery, infantry, airstrikes and maneuvering mechanized forces, we must attack in such a way that, “....it ruptures conventional arm defenses and then attack all echelons of that defense.

In our consequent analysis, we will see how tanks have time and again established their relevance and significance in the modern era whenever they have been employed as a part of CAM.

The following part will comprehensively analyze different case studies from the last 60 years of counterinsurgency operations so as to establish a connection between our variables.

## Evolution in the role of tanks

Starting from the very first offensive of tanks in 1916, The Battle of Somme brought a revolution in the art of conducting warfare. Followed by this, different countries participating in the war *i.e.*, France, UK, Germany and US, produced their tanks. However, the efficiency and aptness of this new technology was still doubtful. The tanks of this time period were difficult to control, not too fast and mechanically quite unreliable but despite these shortcomings, they played a significant role. This eventually compelled the states to advance their technologies in this regard during the interwar period. The time period of World War II marked a dramatic improvement and advancement in the development of new forms of tanks and their employment strategies. The time period of cold war also manifested improved technologies and particularly the development of anti-tank weapons [4]. However, towards the end of cold war, the start of counter insurgency operations started putting question marks on the role and efficacy of tanks due to unconventional and irregular nature of operations. However, evidence suggests that the appropriate utilization of tanks in such operations, particularly according to the combined arms maneuvering doctrine, proved that tanks are still relevant in the modern battlefield and they still possess the capability to playing a decisive role in any particular conflict. To highlight this, we will analyze the role of tanks in Vietnam war, in Chechnya, in battle of Fallujah, battle of sadr city, counter terrorism operations in Pakistan and the current Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

**Vietnam war:** The use of armor in Vietnam war starts from the time period after WWII when French expeditionary forces deployed armored squadrons in addition to the conventional light and motorized infantry. However, these armored squadrons consisted of obsolete US armored vehicles. The lack of efficient deployment of forces by France eventually resulted in Viet-Minh outmaneuvering the French

forces. Considering this scenario, a decade after, when US put their boots on ground in Vietnam, the US government officials totally disapproved the use of armor in Vietnam. However, in 1966, operation circle pines proved to be a turning point in this regard in which US finally decided to deploy heavy armor in Vietnam. Learning from the failure of previous operations, armor was efficiently deployed in Vietnam, particularly in combination with Infantry troops. The success of this operation and other subsequent operations *i.e.*, cedar falls, operation atlanta and operation junction city eventually debunked the myth that Tanks are not useful in jungle like terrains. The armored vehicles that were previously reduced to the role of an ‘infantry taxi’ proved to be quite efficient combat vehicles with the help of which infantry could penetrate thick jungles, get protection from small arms fires and survive limited mine attacks. It eventually strengthened the significance of tank’s mobility and firepower that can prove to be quite beneficial in COIN operations when deployed in combination with dismounted infantry, artillery, air support, thus executing combined arms maneuvering strategy.

**Chechnya:** The Russian action in Chechnya is a pure example of use of armor in an urban environment against an irregular force that made use of conventional as well as unconventional insurgent tactics. Identifying the city of Grozny as the center of gravity, Russian armed forces launched an attack on New Year’s Eve of 1995. In this attack, Russian army employing its conventional strategy was of the view that presence of its armored tanks in the city would be enough to teach the enemy a timely lesson. However, this attack eventually proved to be a failure due to the lack of an efficient operational strategy. This attack was made unsuccessful by the well-coordinated defense strategy of insurgents.

However, on 7<sup>th</sup> January, 1995, Russian forces launched a second attack and, in this attack, they did not repeat the precious mistakes *i.e.*, poor training and poor communication, lack of cohesion among different arms and failure to operate as a combined arms force. After gathering adequate intelligence and deploying additional forces, Russian Army launched a well-coordinated combined arms attack in which the armor would support the dismounted infantry to clear the buildings meanwhile providing them a cover against the smoke screens [5]. The success of this second attack eventually proved that when armor squadrons are deployed in combination with artillery, dismounted infantry and air support, they can prove to be quite efficient for attacking insurgents in an urban terrain and environment.

**Battle of Fallujah:** After the US invasion of Iraq, the city of Fallujah became a center of insurgent activities by the Sunnis. The first attack on the city was known as operation Vigilant resolve in April, 2004.

However, even after 4 days of fighting, US marines had to withdraw. The second battle started in November, 2005 known as the operation new dawn. In this operation armored forces of army were called for support of US Marines. The strategy comprised of cordoning off the city and then the armored forces would penetrate the defense, followed by net operations by the Marines to clear the city with the help of light infantry battalions. The advancement of armor followed by the support of dismounted infantry launched a combined arms maneuver, hence resulting in the success of this operation.

**Battle of Sadr city:** In 2008, US forces again used armored forces in the uprisings of Sadr city after an extensive improvement in their armored technologies. The vulnerabilities in the flank and rear armor were removed, Merkava-inspired Machine Gun was installed, with

some more technological advancements. In this operation, there was a critical danger of collateral damage unlike the operation in Fallujah. For this purpose, a 7 feet wide wall was to be constructed to isolate the insurgents from the population. In this operation, US armored forces again proved to be quite impactful. The Abrams and Bradleys of US army provided the security for these construction efforts. Working closely with the dismounted infantry and special operations sniper teams, a combined arms maneuver proved to be an effective plan which eventually led the insurgent forces to back out. In this operation, the survivability of tanks proved to be a decisive and impactful factor in the success of this operation.

The US operations in Iraq are a substantial proof of the fact that proper deployment of tanks along with the support of artillery, infantry and air support and the utilization of modern technologies that tend to improve the lethality and survivability of this war machine, can eventually make tanks quite efficient and effective in COIN operations against insurgents.

**Counter-terrorism operations in Pakistan:** Coming towards Pakistan, military strategies have evolved over the years, considering the change in nature of enemy and the evolution in the theatres of operations. In the initial years, the primary threat was posed on the eastern border *i.e.*, India. In order to counter this threat, Pakistan focused on devising its conventional warfare strategy and developed its conventional capabilities. Tanks, being a conventional weapon, have been a huge focus for Pakistan's military. However, in the consequent years, particularly in the last two decades, the theaters of operation for Pakistan military have expanded to the western border as well. This change has been well accompanied with a drastic change in the nature of enemy from a conventional regular force to an unconventional irregular force. These changes certainly demanded a change in Pakistan's military strategy which is now more focused on incorporating the maxims of unconventional warfare in its doctrine. In this context, it is necessary to note here that despite these changes, the threat on eastern border is still there, which makes it necessary for Pakistan army to pay equal attention to the conventional capabilities as well, while it moves towards an unconventional approach [6]. This is primarily because the enemy on eastern border is also focused on developing its conventional capabilities, thus embroiling Pakistan in this vicious cycle of an arms race. This constant conventional threat on eastern border makes it compulsory for Pakistan to develop its conventional capabilities, thus implying that tanks haven't been irrelevant for Pakistan in the modern era.

## Discussion

However, since the last two decades, the unconventional threat of terrorism on the western border has made Pakistan's military to stand out in the world as it has set clear examples of countering and defeating an unconventional enemy. Despite going through huge losses, Pakistan has successfully subdued this unpredictable and unconventional enemy, which has not been done by many armies. In this context, it is important to analyze that what role do these conventional war machines *i.e.*, Tanks have in such unconventional counter-terrorism operations. Apparently, the difficult terrains and the uncertain and irregular nature of adversary have been putting a question mark on the relevance of conventional war instruments in these operations. To address this question, it is necessary to mention here that the counter-terrorism operations in Pakistan greatly established the significance of firepower over maneuvering. Tactically, this was done

by synergizing all components of firepower *i.e.*, armor, artillery, air force and combat aviation with infantry's integral firepower. In this context, tanks have justified their 'limited' employment by providing a requisite firepower for the defense of posts and an accurate supporting fire to advancing infantry troops. The successful and effective deployment of tanks in counter terrorism operations was reflected particularly in operation Sher Dil in Bajaur by general Tariq Khan. Tanks proved to be a decisive factor in the clearance of built-up areas *i.e.*, Squadron of 21 Horse was particularly instrumental in the battles of Loe Sam and Inayat Qilla.

In a nutshell, Pakistan military executed the historical counter-terrorism operations by integrating air force, artillery, armor, aviation and infantry which is usually summed up as A4I concept in the military doctrine. This A4I concept is in fact a manifestation of combined arms maneuver strategy that is the main component of contemporary warfare. Consequentially, we can claim that the mobility, survivability and firepower of tanks are the main factors that do not let the tanks leave the battlefield, even in the modern era.

**Russian-Ukrainian war:** The most recent confrontation between Russia and Ukraine has also strengthened the fact that Tanks are still relevant in the modern era. This conflict implies an interesting factor that if your enemy is relying on conventional capabilities, then you are naturally forced to employ conventional capabilities as well. This asserts that if your adversary has Tanks, you are supposed to have tanks as well in order to defend yourself in case of a conventional attack. The recent pleas of Ukrainian Prime Minister for allied states to provide them with tanks to counter Russian tanks are a manifestation of this aspect. However, the recent news reports have also been showing Russian tanks devastated inside the Ukrainian territory due to the anti-tank weapons. This has raised questions on the efficiency of tanks in such modern-day conflicts. In order to address this aspect, we need to consider that the war machine itself cannot guarantee its efficiency and effectiveness. Rather, its correct deployment, its appropriate tactical usage and an efficient operational strategy are the prerequisites for the successful functioning of any war instrument. Therefore, the destructive visuals of Russian tanks cannot be declared as a reflection of insignificance of tanks, rather such visuals are a reflection of shortcomings in the Russian operational and tactical strategy.

## Conclusion

The debate between the conservatives and revisionists mentioned in the start of this paper has to be analyzed now. The analysis of these case studies implies that a mid way between these two debates has to be the most appropriate position to justify the role and relevance of tanks in modern battlefield. The emergence of unconventional threats and irregular warfare along with the proliferation of ATGMs has led to an evolved and less central role of tanks. However, considering the effective capabilities of tanks implies that they must be utilized in combination with other combat arms to launch a strengthened response to the enemy. In this context, states must not completely rely on new technologies and at the same time they ought not to let go of their conventional capabilities completely. Rather, they must keep in line their conventional forces proficient enough for combined arms warfare, meanwhile making efforts to augment these conventional forces with newly emerging technologies. In this regard, armies must modernize their armored forces according to the modern anti-tank technologies. In a nutshell, the efficiency and significance of tanks or any other war instrument cannot be generalized, rather it varies across

different dynamics. Sir Michael Howard aptly described the strategy to understand the changing character of war as:

“...One must be conscious of the uniqueness of every historical event while pursuing the study of past military operations in width, depth and context.”

Most importantly, in the modern warfare, combined arms strategy is the key to tackle the modern day adaptive, complex and hybrid attacks by unconventional enemies. The employment of armor, infantry, artillery and CAS in augmentation of each other's role is the key strategy to go by for such military operations. This is manifested in one of Napoleon's Military Maxims as:

“To wish to hold the cavalry in reserve for the end of the battle, is to have no idea of the power of combined cavalry and infantry charges either for the attack or for defense.”

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