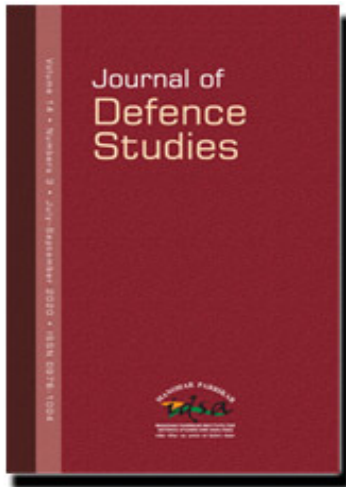


Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

No.1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg
Delhi Cantonment, New Delhi-110010



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Himadri Bose

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Russo-Japanese War

An Examination of Limited War Strategy

*Himadri Bose**

The Russo-Japanese War was fought well over a hundred years ago and symbolised the rise of Japan, as it defeated Russia by executing a near-perfect limited war strategy. Japan incisively defined limited political objectives and calibrated its war strategy accordingly. The Russo-Japanese War highlights that an effective limited war strategy mandates: balanced forces to match the strategy; a robust military policy cognisant of the constraints of the construct; synergy between the political masters and the military executors; disposable diplomatic capital to shape favourable war termination and circumvent international interference; identification of appropriate decisive points in the campaign; and tools to shape public opinion. The article analyses the lessons of the limited war strategy from the Russo-Japanese War and examines their validity in the twenty-first century.

No one starts a war—or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is its political purpose; the later its operational objective.

– Carl von Clausewitz¹

Historically, all wars that Japan fought in the twentieth century leading into World War II, except for the Second Sino-Japanese War, began with surprise naval attacks.² On 8 February 1904, the Japanese Combined Fleet attacked the Russian fleet anchored at Port Arthur commencing

* The author is in the Indian Navy and is currently serving at Kochi in the Indian Naval Safety Team. The views expressed here are his own.



the Russo-Japanese War. The war raged on till September 1905, when the Treaty of Portsmouth was concluded. The stunning Japanese victory over a more formidable occidental power signalled a recalibration of the world order and the arrival of an oriental power in the comity of great powers. While the success of the Japanese grand strategy had various elements, the successful execution of a limited war strategy was indeed noteworthy.

This article examines the application of the concepts of limited war as the foundation of Japanese grand and naval strategy during the Russo-Japanese War. It further draws lessons from the Russo-Japanese War and analyses their validity for limited wars in the twenty-first century, while sifting elements of divergence.

In the twentieth century, Robert Osgood defined 'limited wars' as those in which belligerents scale their war efforts in consonance with distinct objectives, which are limited, and manoeuvre post-war outcomes towards a favourable negotiated settlement.³ Total war, on the other hand, is sharply contrasted with limited war as it is fought for unlimited objectives aimed at the destruction of the enemy or regime change. Therefore, the capability to wield force to break the ability of the enemy to resist is a key determinant in the success of total war.⁴ Arguably, World Wars I and II can be construed as total wars, whereas most wars in the twentieth century have been limited in nature. Some scholars have attempted to define limited war in terms of boundaries imposed by geography, the quantum of the war effort and the scale of the destructiveness of weaponry.⁵ However, as Clausewitz had noted, 'The political object—the original motive for the war—will determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires.'⁶

While it can be argued that limited wars may tend to be geographically confined and less destructive than a total war, these elements spawn from the framework of the political objective. The concept of limited war and the demarcation of the means to wage such a war are as relevant today as they were in the early twentieth century. The relevance of limited war strategies is particularly amplified when the conflict is between nuclear-capable adversaries and escalatory pressures have to be managed under the nuclear overhang.

LIMITED WAR THEORY

While there are numerous interpretations of the concepts of limited war, the ones germane to the discussion on the Russo-Japanese War belong

to Carl von Clausewitz and Julian Corbett. Clausewitz wrote in the time of the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, with a military career spanning from 1792 to 1815. His writings on war were aimed at defining the linkages between the non-quantifiable moral factors at play and the intrinsic nature of war characterised by uncertainty and violence.⁷ His classical work, *On War*, developed the theme of war as an instrument of policy and a struggle against opposing wills.⁸ He opined, 'War is an instrument of policy. It must necessarily bear the character of the policy itself, which takes up the sword in place of the pen, but does not on that account cease to think according to its own laws.'⁹

Clausewitz postulated that wars need to be fought with clarity of purpose and the means commensurate to the aim. His work delved at length on the idea of the complete defeat of the enemy as the primary objective of any war. Therefore, this objective could be construed as unlimited and its eventual aim was the unmitigated defeat of the enemy as a war in the 'absolute form'. War in this form would be relentless and adversaries would tend to go at each other till one perished. In building this theory, he relied on the wars of Napoleon. While recognising the absolute nature of war, he also countered his own rationale by positing that by virtue of the interplay of possibilities and the friction of all its parts, war could manifest itself as a degree of its absolute form.¹⁰ Consequently, he opined that the theory of absolute war needed a polarity of outcomes between the two opposing sides, with victory and defeat playing out as a zero-sum game. However, a war would eventually unfold based on the play of numerous factors, either in concert or opposition, and adversaries attaching different priorities to outcomes and, therefore, perspectives of loss and success would not be proportionate. Thus, all these factors could lead to a war being fought in less than absolute terms.¹¹

Clausewitz argued that war could be fought to overthrow the enemy or for limited bargaining chips to be used at peace negotiations. Such wars would be fought to different scales commensurate to their aims.¹² This form of limited war meant that the complete destruction of the enemy's forces may not be the optimum strategy. The theory of limited war also brought to fore the primacy of political aims. He argued that the reciprocal political interaction and the relative scale of political and military considerations would shape the comparative desire for peace and govern whether the war would remain limited in scope.¹³ Clausewitz's treatment of the theory of limited war formed the cornerstone for further examination by Julian Corbett.

Corbett extended the Clausewitzian idea of fighting for a limited objective to conditions wherein the maritime element was a key criterion.¹⁴ Building on the theories of Clausewitz, he added that a limited objective could be limited either in terms of the political importance or territory, but also could be predisposed to strategic or physical isolation.¹⁵

He opined that limited war was liable to occur between island nations or powers separated by sea. He postulated that an adversary seeking limited war in a maritime context would have to possess command of the sea to sufficiently isolate the objective, and also be capable of countering any possible homeland invasion. The core concept of limited war was not to target the complete might of the adversary, but to limit its influence at a decisive point in the conflict.¹⁶ He argued that a war may be limited due to the limitation of the objective not meriting the total application of national power, but also as 'the sea may be made to present an insuperable physical obstacle'.¹⁷

Corbett theorised that limited war could be broken down into three phases. The first phase would be the conquest of enemy territory, while the second phase was a tactical defence of weathering the offensive of the enemy whilst protecting one's homeland. The last phase was the capitulation of the enemy, as the loss of territory would far outweigh the cost of regaining lost ground.¹⁸ Corbett's proposition of limited war could enable an inferior power in imposing its will on a larger power without unacceptable risk of escalation.

STORM CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON

Japanese interest in Korea and China dates back to 1592 when Japan, under Toyotomi Hideyoshi, attempted to invade China through Korea. The conquest lasted over six years, until 1598, when Japan suffered a major naval defeat and agreed to peace terms and withdrew from the Korean Peninsula.¹⁹ However, the seeds of potential conflict between Japan and Russia were sown during the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 and its aftermath. The Japanese fought the war to scuttle impending Chinese expansion into Korea and uphold Korea as a buffer zone. The war ended with the Treaty of Shimonoseki and Japan acquiring the Liaotung Peninsula, which contained Port Arthur and Taiwan. However, before Japan could savour the fruits of war, Russia, Germany and France coerced her to part with the Liaotung Peninsula to China as indemnity.²⁰ An infuriated Japan pinned the blame for the

so-called 'Triple Intervention' on Russia, the chief perpetrator. This act of collusion to fritter away Japanese accomplishments of war galvanised Japan's resolve to carve an empire of her own. Japan began concentrating on developing all-around national power to secure a place on the high table of great powers.²¹

The Industrial Revolution had led to a widening gap in the living standards of Russia in contrast to the rest of Europe. It was believed that this rising inequality could be addressed by the economic dividends of a Far East expansion. Additionally, as Russia was besieged by acclivitous sentiment seeking political reform, the expansion of Russia in Manchuria also became a matter of prestige for Nicholas II, signifying the greatness of Russia and showcasing him as the rightful ruler.²² In 1896, after the First Sino-Japanese War, Japan suggested demarcating spheres of influence along the 38th parallel. This proposal was not acceptable to Russia as it would mean losing control of warm-water Port Arthur. This was followed by a second request for delineation in 1898, which was once again turned down by Russia.

The crisis was further compounded by the Boxer Uprising (1899–1900) in China. While expelling foreign imperialists from China, the Boxers tore up two-thirds of the Russian railway, which had cost the Russian government as much as a quarter of its budget for three years.²³ Russia entered Manchuria in a show of force to protect its investments. In July 1900, Russia began deploying troops in Manchuria and by September, it had as many as 100,000 troops, eventually occupying Manchuria.²⁴ From 1900 to 1902, the Japanese continued making various diplomatic offers to delineate spheres of influence, but none of these satisfied the Russians. Adding fuel to the fire, Russia reneged on its agreement with China to withdraw troops from Manchuria by 1902. In 1903, the Japanese conjured up a fresh offer to delimit Japanese and Russian spheres of influence by restricting themselves to Korea, while seeking to limit Russia to Manchuria. The Russian leaders, swayed by illusions of great power status, sought a shared sphere of influence in Korea while maintaining exclusivity in Manchuria. Nicholas II termed the Japanese demand 'insolent' and before long, the last hope of diplomatic reconciliation was extinguished.²⁵ A recalcitrant Russia failed to realise that Japan would have reconciled to Russian dominance in Manchuria only if Japan's desire to possess Korea as a strategic buffer was commensurately recognised.

JAPANESE GRAND STRATEGY

War had never been the first option for Japan in settling the issue of mutually acceptable spheres of influence in north-east Asia. However, the importance of Korea as a buffer state was paramount to securing Japanese interests. Japanese policymakers were torn between two schools of thought: one professing that an armed confrontation with a more capable adversary would be devastating for Japan; and the second swearing by a more hard-line view of safeguarding Japanese interests in Korea even if it meant going to war!²⁶ However, in spite of all the nationalistic fervour stemming from the humiliation of 'Triple Intervention', Japan could ill afford to jump headlong into a conflict without favourably shaping the geopolitical environment. Diplomatically isolated in the past, Japan needed an ally to support its strategic aspirations in the Far East. Prime Minister Taro Katsura was convinced that Russian expansion in the Far East was a stepping stone, with more to follow, and wrote: '[Russia] will inevitably extend into Korea and will not end until there is no room left for us.'²⁷

The chosen ally was Great Britain. By the early 1900s, Britain had sizable investments in China and the growing influence of Russia presented the unsavoury possibility of a partition of China. The other great powers, namely, Germany and France, had little to offer to counter Russian influence in China. British aims for the alliance were threefold: to protect British interests in China; address the strategic imbalance; and maintain naval superiority in Asian waters.²⁸ The Anglo-Japanese Alliance was concluded in 1902 and its terms obligated that if more than one non-Asian country entered into an armed conflict with Japan, then Britain would rush to its aid. In effect, this meant that Japan could challenge Russia militarily and none of the great powers would consider an incursion of Korea or Manchuria worth antagonising Britain. The treaty would remain in vogue from 1902 to 1907, providing a five-year window of opportunity for Japan to achieve its strategic goals.²⁹

The lessons learnt from the First Sino-Japanese War had germinated the idea of leveraging diplomatic capital for favourable war termination, reinforcing the criticality of the maintenance of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance through the impending conflict. Furthermore, the sustenance of the war effort was feasible only if sufficient funds were available. Japanese leaders with a Western-education background were dispatched to the United States (US) and England. They went about managing the flow of money through internal and foreign loans, which eventually catered for

the war costs. Intelligence gathering and psychological operations were scaled upwards towards shaping the battlefield. The wily Japanese even managed to have some Chinese generals on their payroll, who observed and harassed the Russian movements.³⁰

The Japanese were quick to understand the key limitations of the Russian logistical supply chain and shaped their war plans to take advantage of the bottlenecks in the Trans-Siberian Railway.³¹ As the inevitability of war loomed ahead, Japan took note of the prerequisite of command of the sea to amass troops on the Korean Peninsula and sustain logistics, while Russia remained blind to its importance.

By December 1903, war plans had crystallised with the campaign being spread over two phases: first, the conquest of Korea; and thereafter, operations would be launched 'north of the Yalu'.³² Limiting the scale of the conflict was preponderant to Japanese success. The political aims of Japan were limited to purging Russia from Korea and establishing a Japanese sphere of influence. Numerous other factors conspired to limit the scale of the conflict. The tyranny of distance and the bane of geography guaranteed that the theatre of operations would be geographically limited and disadvantageous to Russia. The conclusion of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance would manifest itself in the form of British neutrality; consequently, neither Germany nor France would risk aligning with Russia. Neither country had maritime colonies spread across the globe, making them vulnerable to seizure, nor were their oceanic trade volumes of the magnitude justifying commerce raiding. The circumstances were therefore ideal for a limited war.³³

JAPANESE NAVAL STRATEGY

The Russian Far Eastern Fleet was divided between two squadrons separated by the Korean Peninsula and the Korea Strait, with one based at Port Arthur in the Yellow Sea and the other in Vladivostok. The Japanese Navy grappled with the conundrum of the two squadrons coming together, as their combined numbers exceeded that of the Japanese Combined Fleet. While this scenario of combating the Russian Far Eastern Fleet could have played out negatively for the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN), the possibility of the Baltic Fleet sailing halfway across the world to join them would have been a 'Japanese naval catastrophe'.³⁴ However, naval planners firmly believed that Russia would not risk the loss of the Far Eastern Fleet and would not draw the IJN into a decisive fleet encounter. The Russian fleet would remain a 'fleet in being', threatening the Japanese

expeditionary force on the Korean Peninsula, Japanese mainland and its fleet.³⁵ The planners did, however, recognise that the destruction of the East Asian Squadron at Port Arthur was the key to the command of the sea. Admiral Togo was wise enough to appreciate that total control of the sea was neither possible nor a prerequisite for the successful landing of Japanese expeditionary forces.

The IJN started piecing together intelligence on Port Arthur and soon had clarity on its vulnerabilities. They realised that Port Arthur had minimal repair facilities, the channel from the inner to the outer roadstead was too narrow and offered limited passage in low tide, while the heights overlooking the inner harbour meant that ships in the harbour were susceptible to artillery fire if these heights were captured. The IJN planned to sink ships at the mouth of the harbour and even constructed five blockships for the purpose. In January 1904, a month away from the attack, the IJN dropped its plan of sinking blockships at the harbour mouth and decided to dispatch destroyers to carry out a night surprise attack on Port Arthur. Togo wanted to preserve the main fleet, while the Navy General Staff wanted otherwise. Eventually, a compromise was struck and the orders to Togo were: 'Attack with destroyers, but accompany them with the full strength of the fleet to provide support.'³⁶ Notwithstanding the numerical superiority of the Far Eastern Fleet and the existence of the Baltic Fleet, the Japanese Navy was better prepared, geographically better positioned and possessed a more nuanced understanding of the role of the navy in the Japanese grand strategy.³⁷

THE WAR

While the purpose of the article is not to examine the Russo-Japanese War in its entirety, it would nevertheless be relevant to delve into the key concepts of operation and crucial battles, showcasing the limited political aims of a limited war and the corresponding military strategy. The Imperial Army's operations in the Russo-Japanese War were envisioned as a three-pronged offensive spread over two phases: the first lasting through the autumn of 1904; and the second phase beginning in early spring of 1905 till the end of the war (see Figure 1). As part of the three-pronged attack, the First Army was to land at Inchon and surge through Korea towards Manchuria. Meanwhile, the Second Army was to land on the southern coast of the Liaotung Peninsula and head



Figure I Russo-Japanese War, 1905

towards Manchuria in concert with the First Army. Consequently, the Third Army was planned to secure the Liaotung Peninsula and then seize Port Arthur. Eventually, the Fourth Army was to land on the north-eastern coast of Po-Hai Bay and proceed to Liaoyang, coordinating with the Second Army. The success of these landings would lead to the second phase, with the combined Japanese Army engaging the Russian Army. The IJN had two aims: one, to destroy the Russian Pacific Fleet, securing command of the sea; and second, to ensure the safe landing of troops on the Korean Peninsula.³⁸ On 6 February 1904, Japan severed diplomatic ties with Russia, and yet the Russians failed to fathom that war was imminent.³⁹

The Russo-Japanese War began late night of 8 February 1904 when, under the cover of dense fog, a group of 10 Japanese torpedo boats launched a surprise attack on the Russian ships at anchorage at the Russian naval roadstead. The next morning, the main battle fleet started pummelling the harbour and the remaining Russian squadron with artillery.⁴⁰ The attack on Port Arthur damaged two battleships and a cruiser, but most of the fleet remained unscathed.⁴¹ The Battle of Port Arthur raged on but it was a stalemate, with honours split even. Admiral Togo tried every tactic: he bombed, blockaded, attempted to sink ships in the approaches and mined the harbour, but the Russian fleet was not drawn out into a decisive battle. The attack provoked a riposte with the Vladivostok squadron venturing out twice to engage and destroy IJN ships, but returning empty-handed on each occasion. Eventually, the Port Arthur squadron was relegated to a 'fleet in being'.⁴²

Admiral Togo may not have been able to neutralise the Port Arthur squadron but with the Russian Pacific Fleet bottled up in the harbour, the landing of the troops went unopposed. By 22 February 1904, eight Japanese divisions were ashore in Korea and moving north towards the Yalu.⁴³ Cutting across Korea, with the Russians offering little or no resistance, the stage was set for the Battle of Yalu, which lasted from 30 April to 1 May 1904. Against all odds of undertaking an exposed river crossing, the Japanese successfully crossed the Yalu River, much as they had done in the Sino-Japanese War. The Russian Army was ill-prepared and was defeated in battle, suffering more casualties compared to the Japanese. Meanwhile, Admiral Togo's failure at Port Arthur and the impending departure of the Russian Baltic Fleet weighed on the minds of the Japanese planners as they forged ahead with the landward conquest of Port Arthur. The Third Army, led by General Nogi, suffered tremendous losses but, eventually, captured a key hill overlooking the Port Arthur harbour. Shelling of Port Arthur began in August, while the Second Army won the Battle of Nanshan and isolated Port Arthur from the land.⁴⁴

The closing down of Port Arthur by the Second and the Third Armies, coupled with a blockade enforced by Admiral Togo, impelled the Port Arthur squadron to venture out and join forces with the Vladivostok squadron. On 23 June 1904, the Port Arthur squadron unsuccessfully attempted to flee port. Meanwhile, the Vladivostok squadron forayed out twice, in July and August 1904, to attack Japanese merchantmen, but the Port Arthur squadron continued to remain holed up in harbour.

Frustrated, Nicholas II ordered Admiral Vitgeft, who commanded the Port Arthur squadron, to join the Vladivostok squadron. In the ensuing Battle of the Yellow Sea, Admiral Vitgeft lost his life, while the squadron lost two of its seven battleships, six of its eight armoured cruisers and 13 of its 25 destroyers. For the rest of the war, the squadron remained imprisoned within Port Arthur.⁴⁵ Despite the defeat of Port Arthur squadron at the Battle of Yellow Sea, a few days later the Vladivostok squadron ventured out and suffered severe losses at the Battle of Ulsan. For the rest of the war, both the defeated squadrons remained ensconced in their ports. As the defanged Russian Pacific Fleet lay in port, the Japanese Combined Fleet returned for much-needed repairs to face the Russian Baltic Fleet. In the meantime, Port Arthur fell to General Nogi in January 1905.⁴⁶

As the war progressed, successive defeats led the Russian leadership to realise that they had grossly underestimated the Japanese military capability. In response, Russia fell back on the tried and tested endgame of withdrawing and luring the enemy into an area advantageous to itself, thus seeking to annihilate the enemy in a swift decisive battle. Russia could have turned the tables on Japan if this strategy had been well executed, especially at the Battle of Mukden. After the victory at the Battle of Mukden in March 1905, the strained logistical supply lines and shortage of combat-ready reserves, ammunition and supplies led the Japanese leaders to conclude that Japan could not continue in combat for long. Meanwhile, the Russians, in a position of disadvantage, pinned their hopes on the Baltic Fleet, which was soon expected to sail into the waters off Japan. A Russian victory would lead to the severance of supply lines to Korea, triggering a Japanese defeat.⁴⁷

In October 1904, Nicolas II had ordered Admiral Rozhdestvensky to lead the Baltic Fleet around the world to battle the Japanese fleet in home waters. After eight months of sailing around Africa, trudging through the Indian Ocean, a weary Russian Baltic Fleet sailed into the South China Sea by May 1905.⁴⁸ Admiral Rozhdestvensky never had faith in his mission and had consistently advised against it. He is said to have lamented during the arduous journey: 'We have become miserably weak, and with this general sickness, the crazy enterprise of our notorious squadron can hardly count on anything, even on sheer luck.'⁴⁹ On 26 May 1905, the IJN received intelligence that the Russian fleet was heading up the Chinese coast towards the Korean Strait. The advantageously positioned Japanese fleet was elated!⁵⁰ The Battle of Tsushima was fought

from 27 May to 28 May. The battle was an unprecedented disaster for the Russian fleet with 31 of its 38 ships either destroyed or captured. Russian casualties were 5,000, with another 6,000 captured, while the Japanese lost a mere 117 men.⁵¹ The defeat extinguished any hope of a Russian revival of fortunes and set the stage for war termination.⁵²

Russian overconfidence, centred on a supposedly inferior Japanese Army and early termination of hostilities, deluded Russia into not seeking loans to support its war efforts and the financial strain was beginning to hurt. With the '1905 revolution' and the unrest in the army and navy terminating in the Potemkin mutiny of June 1905, the writing was on the wall.⁵³ Faced with rapidly escalating domestic challenges, Nicholas II suspended mobilisation when Japan was disadvantaged and stretched at the Battle of Shenyang.⁵⁴ For Japan, meanwhile, it was critical to seek neutral-party intervention before the Russian war effort gathered steam.⁵⁵ Consequently, during the Battle of Shenyang, Japan sought American assistance to end the war.⁵⁶

On 23 August 1905, a peace agreement was concluded in the town of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the US. An overburdened Japan reconciled to the acquisition of the Liaotung Peninsula and half of Sakhalin Island. The non-payment of the war indemnity to Japan and insignificant loss of territory was small consolation for the price Russia had paid: 'Four hundred thousand soldiers had been killed or wounded; a quarter of a billion rubles in naval assets had been lost; and two and a half billion rubles had been spent in the course of the hostilities.'⁵⁷

A MODEL LIMITED WAR FOR THE TIMES

As mentioned earlier, armed by the machinations of the Triple Intervention, Russia continued to expand its influence to the Far East. Japan recognised that the Russian dominance of Manchuria and suzerainty over the Korean Peninsula would severely jeopardise Japanese security. As a rising power, Japan could hardly challenge the mighty Russia in no-holds-barred joust. Therefore, Japanese political objectives were limited in nature as Japan sought to delineate spheres of influence and retain Korea as a buffer. The options on the table were to expel Russia from Manchuria by military action or forge a diplomatic agreement to limit Russia. Japan, which could not have matched the Russian military might, chose the option of seeking a diplomatic solution and offered Russian dominance in Manchuria in exchange for Japanese dominance in Korea.⁵⁸ While Japanese leadership had defined a limited

political objective, they realised that creating a political vacuum of non-interference by the great powers was imperative to engage with Russia on equal terms, leading them to forge the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. The Japanese manoeuvred to sculpt the diplomatic environment to support its military conquest and eventual war termination. Their aim was not to win the war, but not to lose it either. The Japanese success hinged on getting to a decisive point where the cost to Russia for a compromise for peace would far outweigh that for continued conflict. Furthermore, such a juncture would have to be reached before Russia brought reinforcements into the theatre and its war effort would be spurred by a third country.⁵⁹

Corbett had postulated that a limited war would preferably be waged by island nations or those separated by sea and success would be governed by the command of the sea to isolate the objective and to protect oneself from invasion.⁶⁰ The Japanese political objectives were limited and the territorial objective was also predisposed to strategic or physical isolation. Korea and Manchuria were geographically located at the extremity of Russia's influence and if Japan managed to command the Yellow Sea, it would secure its logistical chain to Korea while safeguarding Japan from an attack. Cognisant of the comparative disadvantage in capability of the Imperial Japanese Army, Japanese strategists banked on the Russian Army's inability to disengage from its western borders to commit its army in its entirety to Manchuria. With the Russian Army partially committed to its western borders, the Imperial Japanese Army could match the remainder in the eastern theatre.⁶¹ Further, Japan, as an island nation, sought solace in the assumption that a counterattack by Russia on the Japanese mainland was highly improbable as Russia lacked both expeditionary military capability and the corresponding political will. However finite the political aims might be in a limited war, a weaker power may be required to commit resources in disproportionate terms compared to the scale of the objective, as was evidenced by the quantum of Japanese war effort.

Corbett observed that the Russo-Japanese War was fought over territory that did not belong to either belligerent and the objective was so limited to one nation (Russia) that she assumed a vanquished outlook without even bringing to bear her full military capability.⁶² The war in Korea was central to the plans of the Japanese Empire, akin to a war for preservation. In contrast, for Russia, it was a war that was worth avoiding. The asymmetry in the relative strategic import of predominance in Korea and Manchuria was heavily skewed towards Japan.⁶³

Clausewitz had hypothesised that an offensive limited war could be waged for limited territorial aims, such as annexation for bargaining during peace negotiations.⁶⁴ The Japanese grand strategy during the Russo-Japanese War was analogous to an offensive limited war. The Meiji leadership had set forth realistic national and military goals for the war, namely, 'protection of the national sovereignty of Japan and achievement of a generally favourable resolution of Russian Issues'.⁶⁵ Japan recognised that absolute victory over Russia was not feasible and therefore, their goal was to seek favourable war termination. Subsequent tactical victories propped up a cohesive Japanese grand strategy, until Japan reached a point of exhaustion at the Battle of Mukden and the military leaders pressed for war termination. However, Russia continued to hold on to illusions of one prestige-enhancing victory before pressing for peace. These hopes were eviscerated at the Battle of Tsushima.

Favourable war termination demands an astute assessment of the escalation threshold and comparative weightage of the political objectives of belligerents. The Japanese military held ground at a decisive juncture, while Japan put forth a generous peace offer and shrewdly sought third-party intervention. Russia needed a face-saving exit, whereas Japan negotiated for the redressal of its strategic concerns. Eventually, Russia surrendered the southern half of Sakhalin and acquiesced to Japanese dominance of Korea. As a concession, Japan parted with war indemnity while Russia withdrew from Manchuria and Japan gained control of a lucrative section of the Russian rail network in Manchuria.

LESSONS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The annihilation of the enemy need not be the *raison d'être* of war. A war can be fought for limited political aims under a rapidly scalable limited war construct. The Russo-Japanese war underlines that a successful limited war strategy mandates the following: developing military capability commensurate to the strategy and identification of decisive points in the campaign; fostering synergy between the military and the political leadership; shaping the diplomatic environment for favourable war termination and compelling communication of the limited nature of the war to both domestic and international audiences. Conversely, constraints in adopting a limited war strategy, particularly amongst nuclear-capable adversaries, are the risk of escalation to a nuclear war, national character and costs, both political and military. A limited war strategy is governed by the fragile balance of political goals, diplomatic

reach and military capability. In contrast, in a total war, political control and negotiations would be slave to the achievement of complete defeat of the adversary. One of the key attributes of the Russo-Japanese limited war strategy was the ability to amply define what constitutes a victory, which need not be absolute. This could even mean resisting expansion of the conflict even after undemanding victories. The success of a limited war strategy would also depend on the identification of decisive points at which the cost to an adversary for a compromise for peace would far outweigh that for continued conflict.

The world order of the twenty-first century stands sharply in contrast with that of the pre-World War I era. The absence of alliances stipulating military intervention for an alliance partner further engenders the requirement to favourably shape the diplomatic environment prior to the conflict. Shaping of the diplomatic milieu prior to executing a limited war might even require publicly defining the limits of the political objectives. Such an articulation of limits has twin-pronged advantage: first, limiting escalation by signalling to the adversary the boundaries of the conflict; and second, creating diplomatic breathing room by allaying concerns of a prolonged conflict or even possible nuclear escalation. The underlying tenet of nurturing diplomatic capital prior to conflict, exercised to near perfection by the Japanese side, is equally relevant today, albeit infinitely more challenging to replicate.

Probably, the most significant departure in the circumstances of the Russo-Japanese War and the twenty-first century is the inception of nuclear weapons. In the nuclear age, limited war presents nuclear-capable adversaries the options of accepting a compromise, continuing with the crisis within the uncertainty of managing escalation thresholds and accepting total war. The management of these choices depends on the strategic culture of a nation and the synergy between the political and military leadership. Under these circumstances, limiting objectives and overt definition of the same serve the purpose of limiting escalation towards unlimited aims and unlimited means. An American military theorist, William V. O'Brien, has theorised the guidelines for the success of a limited war strategy while managing nuclear escalation. He has postulated 'guidelines for limited war' in his book, *The Conduct of Just and Limited War*. These are: 'political primacy and civilian control'; 'limitation of objectives'; 'economy of force and proportionality'; 'voluntary rules or conduct to limit the conflict'; and 'graded response to manage the escalation ladder'.⁶⁶

For instance, during the Korean War, escalation pressures between the conventional forces of the US and China were managed effectively, while the possibility of a nuclear escalation between the US and erstwhile Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was averted.⁶⁷ Nuclear escalation was prevented by public pronouncements against the use of nuclear weapons by both sides and fervent diplomatic parleys.⁶⁸ The predicament of nuclear escalation is further compounded by the increased instances of conventional low-intensity conflicts driven by the so-called 'stability/instability paradox'.⁶⁹ Management of escalation under the shadow of nuclear war is far more complex and challenging than the effective management of conventional escalation illustrated during the Russo-Japanese War.

The strategy in a limited war need not target the complete military might of the belligerent, but may be focused on the part that may be brought to bear on a decisive point in the conflict.⁷⁰ The news of the Baltic Fleet setting sail for Japanese waters sent the Japanese planners into a tizzy, leading to the determination of Port Arthur as a decisive point in the campaign. The IJN was quick to realise that the capture of Port Arthur and defeat of the Pacific Fleet would guarantee Japanese sea lines of communication and restore order of battle (ORBAT) parity between the Baltic Fleet and the Combined Fleet.⁷¹

However, Corbett's hypothesis of isolation of the theatre as a prerequisite for success in limited war and that such wars are more concordant with insular maritime powers may be contentious. Japan successfully executed the Corbettian tenet for limited war by geographically isolating the objective. Nonetheless, a similar course of action is unlikely to fructify in the twenty-first century as strategic airlift capability, long-range standoff weapons and expeditionary capabilities bely the prospect of geographical isolation. Arguably, the Falklands War was a limited war with a distinctive maritime flavour. However, the objective, that is, Falklands Islands, was intrinsically isolated and the geographical isolation was further supplemented by limiting enemy options through pre-emptive action. The establishment of the exclusion zone and the sinking of ARA General Belgrano in the Falklands War led to the Argentinian Navy remaining ensconced in their harbours and the Royal Navy's challenges were reduced to combating the air threat from the Argentinian Air Force.⁷²

The political and military leadership need to recognise the relevance of limited wars and develop a strategy in harmony with its utility and

its constraints. The nature of limited war, in terms of scalability and pace, brings with it challenges that encapsulate both decision making and warfighting capability. Probably the most perilous component of a limited war strategy is the management of the escalation threshold. The Japanese realised the cruciality of the Battle of Tsushima, as Russian success would have galvanised a counterattack on the beleaguered Japanese troops holding the line in Manchuria. The defeat at Tsushima crushed hopes of Russian resurgence but a tsar's sense of national pride kept escalation concerns alive. At this crossroad, the Japanese, mindful of their overreach, offered generous peace by foregoing war indemnity, thereby dousing possible escalation.⁷³ These thresholds of escalation and the importance of generous peace offer need to be recognised by both the political and military leadership. Managing these aspects successfully could often mean holding territory at the threshold of escalation, while setting the scene for negotiations. Such a nuanced understanding of escalation thresholds and commensurate military action can be acquired by limited war concepts finding their way into the lexicon of political and military leadership and military academic circles.

Successful execution of a limited war strategy is underwritten by an apropos communication of the limited political objectives amongst the belligerents. Outlining of such objectives allows each side to envision possible end states and manage escalation thresholds. These objectives may have to be enunciated in word and followed up with action. The articulation of limited war objectives, in effect, may lead to the formulation of unwritten laws of conflict, thereby reducing the risk of escalation. The Japanese signalled their limited political objectives from the very first round of negotiations and restricted their campaign after the Battle of Mukden, indicating the partial fulfillment of their hitherto outlined objectives, and sued for peace negotiations.

In contrast, the US muddled its way through Vietnam by changing its objective goalposts. The initial objective was limited to the defence of Vietnam from internal and external threats. Over time, the objectives expanded to regime change of South Vietnam, while denying use of Laos to Viet Cong and prevention of the so-called 'domino effect' in Southeast Asia. The widening of objectives demanded matching expansion in resources, contributing to its eventual overstretch.⁷⁴ This expansion of objectives violated the principle of definitive limited political objectives, eventually leading to a failed limited war strategy. An example of limited war concepts exploited successfully is the India–Pakistan War of 1971,

which was played out as a total war in the east, aimed at regime change, and as a limited war on the west, aimed at deterring any Pakistani offensive by defending own territory and annexing limited territory to be used for post-war negotiations.

It is worth underscoring that a limited war strategy is primarily structured around limitation of political objectives. However, with the advent of nuclear weapons, the limitation of means obliquely limits the objectives. Nevertheless, the formulation of these objectives continues to underwrite its limited nature and the quantum of force which might well border on being unlimited. Limited war will continue to be the preferred form of war because it renders military force as a rational instrument of national policy and ensures political primacy. The continual examination of political aims and retooling of the military strategy preserves the political nature of limited war. The advent of the nuclear age has all but obliterated total war. Consequently, absolute defeat or victory has been replaced with stalemates and negotiated settlements. Under the overhang of mutual assured destruction in a nuclear war, limited wars amongst nuclear-capable adversaries will increasingly be a *fait accompli* rather than an option.

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