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No. 219/2012 dated 5 December 2012

Creating Reverse Asymmetry: Patterns of IDF's Military Innovation

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Synopsis

The trajectory of Israel's military innovation, viewed through the lens of continuity and change in its security conceptions, is aimed at retaining its "strategic edge" amid continuously changing operational requirements. As the IDF's operational conduct and performance has been increasingly questioned and scrutinised, a key dilemma persists.

Commentary

THE ISRAELI Defence Force's (IDF) recent operational conduct draws attention to its newly emerging "Firepower and Combined Arms" concept of operations. This innovative concept departs sharply from the traditional notions and rules governing high-or-low intensity conflict, air power, ground and sea-based strikes.

The implementation of IDF firepower is target-driven, network-enabled, and precision-oriented. IDF ground commanders, for example, can assume instant "organic control" of any available "shooter" assets of the Air Force as well as the Navy's ship-launched missiles and artillery as soon as targets are identified.

Forefront of military innovation

Since its inception, Israel has been at the forefront of military innovation - it has been the first country to use "smart weapons" technologies – remotely-piloted vehicles, integrated electronic warfare and real-time command, control, communications and intelligence systems, and precision munitions in combat in the 1982 War in Lebanon. Under the conceptual umbrella of "integrated battle", the IDF at that time focused on developing innovative techno-tactical solutions designed to mitigate threats and deficiencies, primarily those exposed during the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

While, these have not fundamentally altered IDF's concepts of operations or force structure, they have inherently shaped the direction and character of American, European and former Soviet strategic perspectives and debates on the future of warfare. Indeed, the IDF has not viewed these innovations as disruptive or revolutionary, but rather as relevant adaptations that fit new techniques, inventions, or operational outlooks into a deeply rooted and fixed military paradigm.

In time, however, the continuous adjustment in IDF's existing military means and methods led to multiple adaptations and bottom-up learning processes, which subsequently accelerated Israel's military innovation. In

doing so, the IDF has adhered to its traditional principles – aiming to create conditions of “reverse asymmetry” by creatively exploiting the IDF’s qualitative superiority in both technology and human capital to offset its relative quantitative inferiority.

Changing strategic realities

The contours of Israel’s military innovation, in both hardware and software, reflect a nexus of strategic necessity, operational requirements, organisational culture, and technological innovation that propel Israel to pursue new approaches to combat, and seek advantages of smart weapons technologies.

For the IDF, however, the process of military innovation has never been smooth, given the constant frictions, internal divisions and debates broadly conceptualised between IDF traditionalists and reformers arguing for new military thinking within the IDF. The former camp emphasised that the increasing reliance on advanced weapons technologies will not ensure that Israel will use them effectively. This is because the political and geostrategic circumstances in which Israel’s security dilemmas are bound have remained largely constant – Israel cannot force its enemies to end the conflict through military means and decision alone.

On the other hand, IDF reformers often point that Israel’s traditional strategic and operational concepts are obsolete, and need to be re-adjusted in response to asymmetric or “hybrid” forms of warfare. In this view, Israel’s military innovation has been not so much about acquiring military-technological capabilities, but rather developing relevant operational concepts and organisational structures to effectively utilise these technologies to deal with the increasing complexity of security challenges, in which the boundaries between the types of conflict and the actors involved have blurred.

By integrating new approaches to combat coupled with advanced weapons systems and technologies adapted to Israel’s needs - i.e. early warning and intelligence-gathering ISR systems, communication and combat management systems, over-the-horizon targeting and precision-guided munitions, variety of UAVs and unmanned remotely-controlled tactical systems, electronic warfare systems - the IDF would retain its superiority in firepower and mobility in conventional warfare. This is achieved while acquiring “sub-conventional” capabilities adapted to complex threat environment characterised by prevalent asymmetric and low-intensity threats.

Challenges and limitations

Notwithstanding the persistent debates, the IDF has continuously developed innovative strategies and tactics driven primarily by changing operational needs, while increasingly harnessing advanced military technologies in nearly every combat domain. In the process, however, the IDF has also faced a broader array of complex challenges, limitations, and constraints emanating from the confluence of political, economic, military, and socio-cultural factors that have mitigated Israel’s military effectiveness and its use of force.

For the IDF, it has to cope with managing the complexities of military activities at two inter-related dimensions – vertical and horizontal. The vertical dimension includes the realities of preparation and conduct of war at the political, strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Specifically, the IDF has to increasingly prepare and adapt for three types of military commitments simultaneously: terrorism, guerrilla, and low-intensity warfare; conventional operations; and long-and-short range ballistic missile threats coupled with WMD threats.

The strategic and operational challenges constraining the IDF in the vertical dimension have inherently also transcended into the horizontal - pertaining to the numerous, simultaneous, and interdependent defence management tasks, daily requirements, and processes to prepare for multi-level conflicts.

Ultimately, with the widening range of military commitments, IDF’s operational conduct and performance has been increasingly questioned and scrutinised, both internally as well as externally. The key dilemma facing Israeli defence planners is the question how to build a force and doctrine capable of dealing simultaneously with current security threats, while anticipating future challenges in an era of strategic uncertainty.

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