COMMENTARIES

The Limits of Power: Lessons from the Football Pitch and the Modern Battlefield

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EXECUTIVE BRIEF & KEY FINDINGS

On the football pitch, the strongest team does not always win. Star players, superior rankings and greater resources can be overturned by discipline, tactical intelligence and the ability to adapt under pressure. The same principle is increasingly visible on the modern battlefield, where militarily dominant states struggle to convert overwhelming power into decisive victory against smaller but resilient adversaries. From Ukraine's decentralized resistance and drone warfare to Iran's emphasis on survivability and networked defence, contemporary conflicts reveal a fundamental shift in the nature of power: strength still matters, but organization, information, innovation and resilience increasingly determine who controls the outcome.

Introduction

Every FIFA World Cup reminds us that power alone does not guarantee victory. On paper, the outcome often appears predictable. Teams with higher rankings, greater resources, star players, and stronger footballing traditions are expected to dominate. Yet the modern World Cup repeatedly produces results that challenge these assumptions. Saudi Arabia's victory over Argentina in 2022, Morocco's remarkable journey to the semi-finals, and Japan's wins against Germany and Spain demonstrated that organization, discipline, and adaptability can often compensate for differences in

resources and reputation.

While football and warfare are fundamentally different activities, the World Cup provides a useful metaphor for understanding a broader transformation in international security. Across contemporary conflicts, militarily superior powers are increasingly finding it difficult to secure quick and decisive victories against smaller opponents. The Russia-Ukraine war, the prolonged American experience in Afghanistan, and Iran's ability to withstand sustained pressure from stronger adversaries all point towards an important reality: power remains important, but converting power into victory has become far more complicated.

The Myth of Overwhelming Power

For much of modern history, power was often measured through tangible indicators such as military size, economic strength, industrial capacity, and technological superiority. These indicators remain important, but recent developments suggest that they no longer provide a complete picture.

Before Russia launched its military operation in Ukraine in 2022, many observers expected a rapid victory. Russia possessed clear advantages in military hardware, manpower, economic resources, and strategic depth. Yet Ukraine's resistance transformed what many anticipated to be a short campaign into a prolonged war. The conflict demonstrated that determination, organizational effectiveness, leadership, and external support can significantly reduce the advantages enjoyed by a stronger adversary.

The same lesson is visible in football. Morocco did not possess the individual star power of traditional football giants, yet it succeeded because of tactical discipline, collective cohesion, and a clear strategic vision. Rankings reflected potential, not outcomes. Similarly, military power reflects capability, not guaranteed success.

The Rise of the Competitive Underdog

One of the defining characteristics of modern competition—whether in sports or security—is the growing ability of weaker actors to challenge stronger ones.

Underdogs rarely succeed by competing on the terms set by stronger opponents. Instead, they identify vulnerabilities and exploit them. In football, this may involve disciplined defending, rapid counterattacks, and tactical flexibility. In warfare, it often takes the form of asymmetric strategies designed to offset conventional disadvantages.

The Russia-Ukraine war offers several examples. Ukraine recognized that matching Russia tank-for-tank or aircraft-for-aircraft would be impossible. Instead, it focused on mobility, decentralized operations, intelligence integration, drone warfare, and precision strikes. The objective was not necessarily to overpower Russia directly but to impose costs and deny it an easy victory.

This logic is increasingly visible across contemporary security environments. The goal of many weaker actors is no longer outright military victory in the traditional sense; rather, it is to make victory prohibitively expensive for the stronger side.

Iran and the Importance of Resilience

Perhaps no contemporary state illustrates this logic better than Iran.

For decades, Iranian military planners have operated under the assumption that they cannot match major powers such as the United States in conventional military capabilities. Instead of attempting to mirror the military structures of stronger powers, Iran has focused on building resilience.

A key feature of this approach is often described as the "mosaic defence" concept. Rather than relying exclusively on centralized command structures, Iran developed multiple layers of local and regional command networks capable of functioning even if higher headquarters are disrupted. The objective is simple: if one part of the system is disabled, the rest of the network continues to operate.

This approach reflects an important lesson of modern warfare. In an age of precision strikes, cyber operations, and advanced surveillance systems, highly centralized structures can become vulnerable targets. Resilience increasingly depends on redundancy, decentralization, and the ability to continue functioning under pressure.

The significance of this lesson extends far beyond Iran. It highlights a broader shift in strategic thinking from concentrating power to dispersing it in ways that enhance survivability.

Information as a Strategic Weapon

Another factor reshaping contemporary conflict is the growing importance of information.

Historically, intelligence gathering was largely the domain of states with sophisticated intelligence agencies. Today, the widespread availability of digital information has transformed the nature of intelligence collection. Open-source intelligence (OSINT) derived from social media platforms, satellite imagery, public databases, and digital footprints has become an increasingly valuable resource.

Several conflicts have demonstrated how publicly available information can reveal operational patterns, troop movements, infrastructure locations, and organizational structures. The digital age has created a situation in which information that appears harmless in isolation can become strategically significant when aggregated and analysed.

The lesson is clear: information superiority is no longer determined solely by access to classified intelligence. The ability to collect, analyse, and exploit open-source information has become a critical component of national security.

Technology and the Democratization of Capability

One reason why stronger powers find it increasingly difficult to dominate weaker opponents is the diffusion of technology.

Advanced capabilities that were once restricted to a handful of major powers are becoming more accessible. Drones, commercial satellite imagery, secure communications, artificial intelligence-enabled analysis, and precision-guided systems are gradually lowering the barriers to effective military action.

Ukraine's extensive use of drones provides a notable example. Relatively inexpensive systems have been used to challenge platforms that cost millions of dollars. This does not eliminate the advantages of larger militaries, but it changes the cost-benefit equation.

The football equivalent would be the widespread availability of advanced analytics. Data-driven insights that were once exclusive to elite clubs are now available to teams with far fewer resources. As technology spreads, the gap between the strongest and the rest narrows.

Lessons for India

For India, these developments offer several important lessons.

First, military modernization should be accompanied by investments in resilience. The ability to operate under conditions of disruption is becoming as important as the ability to project power.

Second, India should continue strengthening decentralized and networked command structures capable of functioning effectively during periods of intense pressure. Future conflicts may involve cyberattacks, electronic warfare, and strikes against communication networks. Resilience must therefore be built into the system itself.

Third, greater emphasis should be placed on open-source intelligence, information security, and digital awareness. In an era where information can be weaponized, safeguarding data and exploiting publicly available information are both essential.

Fourth, India must continue investing in emerging technologies such as drones, artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, and advanced surveillance capabilities. These technologies are increasingly shaping the character of warfare.

Finally, national security should not be viewed solely through the lens of military strength. Institutional adaptability, technological innovation, societal resilience, and strategic flexibility are becoming equally important determinants of success.

Conclusion

The FIFA World Cup offers a powerful metaphor for understanding the changing nature of power in the twenty-first century. Stronger teams still possess advantages, just as stronger states continue to enjoy significant military and economic capabilities. However, the relationship between power and victory is no longer straightforward.

The experiences of Ukraine, Iran, and other actors demonstrate that resilience, adaptability, information, and innovation can significantly reduce traditional power asymmetries. The modern battlefield, much like the modern football pitch, increasingly rewards those who can adapt faster rather than those who merely possess greater resources.

The central lesson is not that power has become irrelevant. Rather, it is that power alone is insufficient. In an era defined by technological diffusion, information abundance, and asymmetric competition, the true challenge lies not in acquiring power but in translating it into strategic outcomes. As recent events on both the football pitch and the battlefield have shown, that task is becoming increasingly difficult even for the strongest players.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of CNAWS.

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